

“[H]is voice resounds throughout Ireland”

Irish Nationalism and the Appropriation of Wolfe Tone, 1798-1923

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Acknowledgements

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Introduction

Nearly seventy-five years after his death 1798, it was said that “There are few patriots around whose honoured names crowd more memorable though melancholy associations connected with Irish nationality than that of Theobald Wolfe Tone...his anxious, unwearying, and noble exertions to ameliorate the cruel wrongs under which [Ireland] suffered, have marked him as one whose name shall ever live in the hearts of Irishmen.”¹ Indeed, Wolfe Tone had become a beloved symbol and strategic nationalist tool.

The revolutionary summer of 1798 saw unprecedented uprisings against the British crown as Theobald Wolfe Tone and his United Irishmen launched a series of attacks to upend the institutionalized privileges of the Protestant Ascendancy and establish an Irish Republic.² Inspired by the principles of the American and French revolutions, the United Irishmen sought to instate civil and economic liberties across sectarian lines. Their pursuits were ultimately futile, and Wolfe Tone, for his critical role in the rebellion, was sentenced to be hanged.³ In November 1798, having just been convicted of treason, he stood before the court martial, declaring, “I have attempted to establish the independence of my country; I have failed in the attempt; my life is in consequence forfeited.”⁴

¹ “The Grave of Wolfe Tone,” *Freeman’s Journal*, September 15, 1873.

² Prior to 1798, the 1720 British Declaratory Act declared Westminster’s supremacy over the Irish parliament, asserting its control over Irish legal cases. English incursions in Ireland predated the 1720s by hundreds of years. In the 12th century, Henry II of England established claims to portions of Ireland, and the Kingdom of Ireland (1542-1801) was not fully autonomous either. Henry VIII’s 1542 Crown of Ireland Act and the Tudor Conquest (1534-1603) saw the formal colonization of Ireland with native expulsions, import of Protestant settlers, imposition of English common law, and systematic cultural suppression. This history effectively created and entrenched the Protestant Ascendancy (and Catholic disenfranchisement) that informed the 1798 rebellion, the Act of Union, and Irish nationalism through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. For more on pre-Union history and the foundations of Irish nationalism see Alan J. Ward, “England and Ireland Before the Union of 1801,” in *The Easter Rising: Revolution and Irish Nationalism*, 2nd ed. (Harlan Davidson Inc., 2003); Richard English, “Ireland before 1800,” in *Irish Freedom: The History of Nationalism in Ireland* (Macmillan, 2006).

³ Tone, in fact, was never hanged as he died in prison, likely after taking his own life.

⁴ Theobald Wolfe Tone as quoted in Marianne Elliott, *Wolfe Tone: Prophet of Irish Independence* (Yale University Press, 1989), 393.

Following Tone's death and the failed uprisings, England enacted the 1801 Act of Union to abolish the Dublin parliament and formally bring the Kingdom of Ireland under the full legislative control of the UK, becoming the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland.⁵ Ireland's subordination to the British crown and parliament was now solidified. Over the next 120 years, those who would seek to repeal this legislation would find a vibrant nationalist figure in the spirited diary and brief auto-biography of Wolfe Tone.

This use of Tone's life to advance the nationalist cause belongs to a broader tradition. In 1883, republican activist Michael Davitt noted that the names of prominent nationalist figures, including that of Wolfe Tone, "are associated with principles and principles cannot betray. These men are in their graves, and they live in Irish history, and when you use their names you honour and propagate the principles with which their names are associated."⁶ Historian Tom Garvin also discerned this use of history by Irish nationalists, stating that "a political myth is not a scientific account of events, but is primarily a prescription for political action."⁷ The memory of Tone was used to this end; to mobilize nationalists, advance political agendas, and inspire ideological unity. As is the nature of Irish nationalism, however, the prescription for political (or revolutionary) action was never uniform.

Between the Act of Union in 1801 and the Irish Civil War (1922-1923), Irish nationalism represented a wide swath of ideologies and objectives. For much of the nineteenth century, *constitutional* nationalists advocating home rule enjoyed popular support.⁸ These nationalists, represented first by the Repeal Association and later the Irish Parliamentary Party (IPP), campaigned for the establishment of an autonomous Irish parliament responsible for domestic

⁵ English, *Irish Freedom*, 77.

⁶ "Mr. Michael Davitt," *The Freeman's Journal*, January 29, 1883.

⁷ Tom Garvin, *Evolution of Irish Nationalist Politics* (Gill and Macmillan, 1981), 105.

⁸ Home rule and devolution are synonymous and will be used interchangeably.

affairs, obtained through constitutional means. Simultaneously, the Fenians and the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB) constituted the *revolutionary* brand of nationalism.⁹ Unlike the constitutional nationalists who proposed non-violence and the continuation of Ireland's status as a member of the United Kingdom, the IRB was committed to achieving a fully independent Irish republic through physical force.¹⁰

Despite being founded in 1858, the IRB would not gain widespread support until the Easter Rising of 1916, after which republican nationalism effectively supplanted constitutional popularity. Before this shift, parliamentary nationalism, under renowned leaders such as Daniel O'Connell, Isaac Butt, and Charles Stewart Parnell, dominated nineteenth-century national politics. Therefore, the period between Wolfe Tone's death in 1798 to the end of the Civil War in 1923 is particularly apt for observing both the apogee of constitutional nationalism and the rise of popular republicanism. In this transition, the evolution of Wolfe Tone's appropriation becomes particularly evident.

This paper demonstrates that, whether by one or the other branch of Irish nationalism, Wolfe Tone was co-opted as an image of Ireland's vibrant and heroic past and a symbol of its long-standing campaign for sovereignty. Despite their profound ideological differences, republican and constitutional nationalists found utility in Tone's history for their particular campaigns, with each faction offering their own interpretation of his life and struggle. In these evocations, the contested and evolving conceptions of Wolfe Tone are revealed. So too are the common and persistent themes his history offered, illuminating the broad ambitions permeating the various nationalist movements, complicating an often simplified narrative of nationalism's

⁹ Fenian refers to members of the IRB.

¹⁰ While political parties and nationalist organizations broadly speaking ascribed to one of these two categories, these approaches were not mutually exclusive, and such nationalist bodies often included both moderate and more radical membership.

religious dimension. Ultimately, examining the function of Wolfe Tone in nationalist-constructed histories reveals nationalists' rhetorical strategies and priorities.

i. Historiography and Methodology

This thesis relies on several branches of literature. One is the nature of political commemoration in Ireland. In his 1996 essay, "98' After 98,'" Kevin Whelan studies the contested meaning of the rebellion and how these debates were wielded to mould public opinion. He explains that "the 1798 rebellion was fought twice: once on the battlefields and then in the war of words which followed in those bloody footprints." The uprising, he states, "never passed into history, because it never passed *out* of politics."¹¹ Whelan's work illustrates how politics can breathe life into history—playing an active role in reviving and constructing it. While Whelan's research focuses on the rebellion and the construction of Irish identity up until 1830, the phenomenon he describes persisted long after 1798, with Wolfe Tone gaining particular notoriety in the 1840s. Therefore, following in Whelan's footsteps, this analysis of Wolfe Tone is valuable for gaining a more nuanced understanding not only of Irish nationalism, but also of the function of history in shaping ideology and fostering identity.

Beyond Marianne Elliott's acclaimed biography, *Wolfe Tone: Prophet of Irish Independence*, broader works on subsequent nationalist sentiment, objectives, and politics were also relied upon. Tom Garvin's *Evolution of Irish Nationalist Politics*, Leon Ó Brion's *Revolutionary Underground: The Story of the Irish Republican Brotherhood*, and Eoin Ó. Broin's *Sinn Féin and the Politics of Left Republicanism* have provided the foundation on which references to Tone are contextualized and understood.¹² Furthermore, the works of historians C.J.

¹¹ Kevin Whelan, "98 After '98: The Politics of Memory," in *The Tree of Liberty: Radicalism, Catholicism and the Construction of Irish Identity, 1760-1830*, vol. 1. (University of Notre Dame Press, 1996), 133.

¹² Marianne Elliott, *Wolfe Tone: Prophet of Irish Independence* (Yale University Press, 1989); Tom Garvin, *Evolution of Irish Nationalist Politics* (Gill and Macmillan, 1981); Leon Ó Brion, *Revolutionary Underground: The Story of the Irish Republican Brotherhood, 1858-1924* (Gill and Macmillan, 1976); Eoin Ó. Broin, *Sinn Féin and the Politics of Left Republicanism*, 1st ed (Pluto Press, 2009).

Woods, Alan J. Ward, Lawrence J. McCaffrey, and Gary Owens have offered more precise analyses regarding the religious character of nationalism, traditions of commemoration, and nationalist strategies, which were used to understand certain nuances within nationalist co-option of Wolfe Tone.¹³

My analysis of the nationalist appropriation of Tone was gleaned primarily from newspapers which, for a number of reasons, were particularly valuable for the task at hand. Firstly, publications such as *The Nation*, *The Freeman's Journal* and *Irish Freedom* often aligned themselves with a nationalist cause, and therefore also with certain audiences, rhetorical strategies, and political objectives. Secondly, they platformed a number of voices, such as articles, letters to the editor, minutes of meetings, transcription of speeches, and advertisements. For this reason, newspapers offer a wide range of references to Wolfe Tone, which have been organized and analyzed for this paper.

From my analysis, nationalist references to Tone primarily advanced the following purposes and were therefore arranged in these categories: firstly, there were cultural nationalists for whom Tone functioned as a mythic symbol of Ireland's distinct history, without an explicit vision for the island's political future. The other key group is those for whom Tone was used in support of a particular nationalist programme: within this category, were those championing increased legislative autonomy through home rule, versus those championing full independence or separation from England; and there were those who endorsed non-violent, parliamentary means and those who endorsed violent, republican strategies. These classifications effectively

¹³ C. J. Woods, *Bodenstown Revisited: The Grave of Theobald Wolfe Tone, its Monuments and its Pilgrimages* (Four Courts Press, 2018); Alan J. Ward, *The Easter Rising: Revolution and Irish Nationalism*, 2nd ed. (Harlan Davidson Inc., 2003); Lawrence J. McCaffrey, "Irish Nationalism and Irish Catholicism: A Study in Cultural Identity," *Church History* 42, no. 4 (1973); Gary Owens, "Nationalist monuments in Ireland, c. 1870-1914: Symbolism and Ritual," in *Ireland: Art into History*, ed., Raymond Gillespie and Brian P. Kennedy (Roberts Rinehart Publishers, 1994).

encompass the principal nationalist streams and organizations, reflecting the dominant concerns and debates of this period.

While the majority of references to Tone reflect these broad ideologies—and analysis is therefore concentrated on these categories—other sub-movements evoked Tone. This thesis’s chief omission is of agrarian activists’ co-option of Tone as a proto-socialist figure. The agrarian movement, headed by the Land League, identified their nationalism with the rural, agricultural population, and fought against the Anglo-Irish landlord system, in so doing regularly repeating Wolfe Tone’s reference to “the men of no property.”¹⁴ Nevertheless, this thesis will focus on the dominant, polar realms of constitutional and republican nationalism and how their evocation of Wolfe Tone may be understood.

Also due to this thesis’s limited scope, analysis could not be extended to unionists’ (or Ulster loyalists’) critical interpretation of Wolfe Tone. Those who advocated for the preservation of the 1801 Act of Union and the continuation of Ireland’s status as a member of the United Kingdom are key to understanding the development of Irish nationalism, as Irish nationalism and unionism were perpetually reacting to each other’s aspirations and grievances.¹⁵ Undoubtedly, understanding how Ulster Unionists (both in terms of the political party and the broader ideology) handled the history of Wolfe Tone could provide greater insight into Unionists’ rhetorical understanding and employment of the past. Nevertheless, while a comparative analysis between the unionist and nationalist co-option of Wolfe Tone may prove valuable, there are more than enough variations within the nationalist context for it to be a stand-alone analysis.

¹⁴ For further research into this sub-stream of nationalism and its evocation to Tone, see *The United Irishman’s* persistent use of this excerpt from Wolfe Tone’s diary in the newspaper’s 1848 publications: “Our Independence must be had at all hazards. If the men of property will not support us, they must fall: we can support ourselves by the aid of that numerous and respectable class of the community, *the Men of No Property*.”

¹⁵ While some historians have framed unionism as a form of nationalism, if not otherwise not specified, “nationalists” in this thesis will refer to Irish activists seeking self-determination, whether that be via parliamentary nationalism or republicanism, and with the goal of home rule or independence.

Chapter One

While the final years of Tone's life would come to define his legacy, he was not always committed to the republican cause.¹⁶ Like most lively and engaged individuals, his political thought varied over the years. Far from his stance in 1798, a decade earlier he had sent Prime Minister William Pitt a memorandum proposing a military outpost in the Sandwich Islands, thereby advancing the Empire's imperial strongholds, and later would contemplate enlisting in the East India Company.¹⁷ Therefore, it is not quite accurate to say, as Tone did in his speech before the court martial, that he was a separatist, having "regarded the connection between Great Britain and Ireland as the curse of the Irish nation," "from [his] earliest youth."¹⁸ Yet it is this final republican image that impressed itself into the mind and memory of subsequent nationalists.

i. Wolfe Tone in the Aftermath of 1798

In the aftermath of the 1798 uprising, revolutionary nationalism weakened as parliamentary efforts came to the forefront of the movement¹⁹—a decline exemplified by the popularity of Daniel O'Connell, the leading Irish politician committed to the restoration of the Irish parliament through non-violent means. With constitutional nationalism gaining popularity, the 1798 Rebellion and Wolfe Tone lost much of their nationalist appeal. In fact, for the first half of the nineteenth century, nationalist organizations remembered the devastation of the 1798 Rebellion and feared its repetition; the model of the United Irishmen had proven a failure, and militarism was to be avoided.²⁰

¹⁶ For more on the evolution of Tone's ideology see Tom Dunne, *Theobald Wolfe Tone - Colonial Outsider: An Analysis of His Political Philosophy* (Cork: Tower Books of Cork, 1982); Thomas Bartlett, "The Burden of the Present: Theobald Wolfe Tone, Republican and Separatist," in *The United Irishmen: Republicanism, Radicalism, and Rebellion*, David Dickson, Dáire Keogh, and Kevin Whelan (The Lilliput Press, 1993).

¹⁷ Elliott, "Early Life," in *Wolfe Tone*.

¹⁸ Wolfe Tone in *Speeches from the Dock; Or, Protests of Irish Patriotism, part I*, ed. T.D. Sullivan et al. (A.M. Sullivan, 1886; repr., Project Gutenberg, 2024), 20.

¹⁹ Garvin, *Evolution of Irish Nationalist Politics*, 45-46.

²⁰ Garvin, *Evolution of Irish Nationalist Politics*, 47.

This detachment from republican nationalism was encouraged by the political climate in which British officials regarded references to Wolfe Tone as a violent provocation. As reported in *The Freeman's Journal* in 1845, politician and member of the newly revived Catholic Association Richard Lalor Sheil found himself faced with prosecution for having mentioned Wolfe Tone's name in a speech: "A series of vehement harangues were delivered by Mr. Sheil, which were considered to be of a very exciting nature, but it was not until he selected the memoirs of Theobald Wolfe Tone, as the subject of his speech, which the government considered to be fully as minacious, as it was admonitory, that it was deemed judicious to institute proceedings against Mr. Sheil in a criminal court."²¹ Though his trial was postponed, and the prosecution later abandoned, Sheil's case illustrates why the history of Wolfe Tone and the United Irishmen were a precarious political tool, going largely unrecognized by nationalists for decades after the failed uprising.

ii. The Revival of Wolfe Tone

The man largely responsible for reviving Wolfe Tone's name was Young Irelander Thomas Davis. Inspired by the romantic tradition of the 1820s and 1830s, Davis and his co-founders inaugurated the Young Ireland movement in 1842 with the aim of recovering a distinct Irish identity.²² To this end, they developed and promoted Irish language, folklore, and culture, and thus championed a heroic history of Ireland in which Tone became central. After visiting Tone's unmarked grave in Bodenstown, County Kildare, Davis published the poem *Tone's Grave* in the Young Irelander's nationalist newspaper, *The Nation*. The 1843 poem reveals that in the early 1840s, Tone was still relegated to relative obscurity: "A martyr for Ireland—his grave has no stone— / His name seldom named, and his virtues unknown."²³ This

²¹ "The Speeches of the Right Honourable Richard Lalor Sheil, M.P.," *The Freeman's Journal*, May 15, 1845.

²² Brian Feeney, *Sinn Féin: A Hundred Turbulent Years* (University of Wisconsin Press, 2003), 21.

²³ Thomas Davis, "Tone's Grave," 1843. Cartlann Online Archive.

characterization of Tone's status would quickly become outdated as the Young Irelanders seized the opportunity to claim a symbol of Irish heroism and national history for their construction of the "historicist nationalist myth."²⁴ As Tom Garvin explains, "the nationalists found that the past supplied plenty of material and they clothed their cause in potent images derived from earlier nationalist campaigns."²⁵ In fact, the co-founder of *The Nation*, Charles Gavan Duffy, admitted that it "was not a journal designed to chronicle the small beer of current politics, but to teach opinions ... here was a journal which was not a commercial speculation, but the voice of men to whom the elevation of Ireland was a creed and a passion."²⁶

Having analyzed *The Nation* newspaper, Sean Ryder explains that, for the Young Irelanders, Wolfe Tone and the United Irishmen functioned not to represent their political ideology, but to embody romantic and heroic patriotism.²⁷ Ryder's conclusion is applicable to broader nationalist stripes and newspapers: for example, through the 1840s, *The Freeman's Journal* adopted a similarly poetic tone. In 1842, the journal responded to a letter sent by Wolfe Tone's wife.

We appreciate the fond devotion with which all connected with Tone cling to his name and memory, and we pride the line written to the praise of him whose honour and high fame is his country's, whether it be the unsought tribute of any of the few remains of his fellow-labourers, or their descendants, or from the hand of her who shared his affections, partook of his early hopes, and mourns his death, but who glories in his imperishable fame. From us a response as warm as is the pride we feel in the illustrious subject shall always emanate.²⁸

²⁴ Garvin, *Evolution of Irish Nationalist Politics*, 104.

²⁵ Garvin, *Evolution of Irish Nationalist Politics*, 105.

²⁶ Charles Gavan Duffy, *Young Ireland* (Dublin: M. H. Gill & Son, 1884), quoted in M. L. Brillman, "Loyalty and Repeal: The Nation, 1842–46," in *Irish Journalism Before Independence: More a Disease than a Profession*, ed. Kevin Rafter, 1st ed. (Manchester University Press, 2011), 36.

²⁷ Sean Ryder, "Young Ireland and the 1798 Rebellion," in *Rebellion and Remembrance in Modern Ireland*, ed. Laurence M. Geary (Four Courts Press, 2001), 144.

²⁸ "T. Wolfe Tone," *The Freeman's Journal*, December 14, 1842.

This poetic evocation did more to foster an emotional association with Wolfe Tone than to explain the particularities of his ideology. Despite the relative novelty of Tone's history in nationalist circles, the paper laid the groundwork for a poetic, reverential approach to Tone's life.

iii. The Politicization and Contested Interpretations of Wolfe Tone

At the height of the campaign for legislative autonomy via parliamentary means, this de-emphasis of Tone's revolutionary tactics is persistently evident. Such is the case within the Repeal Association, the political party headed by Daniel O'Connell. During an 1845 Repeal meeting, a number of members were mourning the recent death of Thomas Davis who, accordingly, was the topic of conversation. In this discussion, barrister Wilson Gray took the time to clarify the nature of Davis's interest in Wolfe Tone, explaining the appropriate understanding of Tone as understood by constitutional nationalists:

Some when they hear of [Thomas Davis's] admiration of Wolfe Tone may imagine that this admiration was conceived merely in a spirit of revolutionary fanaticism, and a wild hatred of the country from which we have suffered so many wrongs, but his admiration of Wolfe Tone was of a different character....that Wolfe Tone was the first to originate the grand idea, and partially to carry it into effect, of uniting Irishmen of all parties, creeds, and sections in an effort for their common country (cheers). The days of Wolfe Tone were days of revolution and of war— great purposes were then effected by violent agencies... But the times are altered, and men now do by intellectual power...the same idea that Wolfe Tone would have worked out in his time by the peculiar instrument of his age, Mr. Davis would in his day have worked out by the instruments that were proper to his own [constitutional methods].²⁹

In this meeting, Wilson Gray illustrated the impulse to divorce the growing veneration for Wolfe Tone from his revolutionary tactics. Yet, Gray did not cast aside this period of Irish history nor did he disparage Tone. Rather, Gray demonstrated how the popular constitutional stream of nationalism could reconcile Tone's image with their contemporary non-violent objectives. In

²⁹ Wilson Gray, "Loyal National Repeal Association," Meeting of the Loyal National Repeal Association, *The Freeman's Journal*, September 23, 1845.

other words, as the history of Wolfe Tone rose in popularity, so did the effort to advocate non-violence and to reinterpret Tone's life to counterbalance his revolutionary reputation.

Soon after these events, however, divisions arose within the Association as more radical members, refusing to disavow physical force tactics, refuted the party's non-violent principles. One such individual was Thomas Devin Reilly, who left O'Connell's party over the matter. In 1848 he wrote to *The Freeman's Journal*, stating that "...in no enslaved country can I regard 'legal and constitutional agitation' as anything but a delusion...at all times in Ireland, the idea of a 'parliamentary party,' great or small, is to me not only a cruel delusion, but a national crime, and an anti-national policy." To substantiate this claim, Reilly stated that he had "learned from the writings" of Wolfe Tone, making it clear that his radical viewpoint was shared by the beloved national martyr. Reilly's letter, however, also indicated that popular support for violent resistance was not yet widely accepted or encouraged: "I take this public opportunity of stating what I have long desired to state— that I know very few men who hold them, and these not connected with me at all— that I have held them and advocated them, in despite, and against the will and advice and direction of all my personal friends and acquaintances and particularly of every member of my own family."³⁰

Reilly's letter suggests that, despite the popularity of constitutional nationalism, revolutionary separatism remained a steady, albeit underground, dimension of the nationalist movement. The failed uprisings of revolutionary organizations helped solidify the popularity of the electoral channel. The Young Irelanders in 1848 and Fenians in 1867 launched armed insurrections with the hope of establishing an Irish republic, but each of their swift defeats underlined the limitations of republican strategies. Therefore, from the early years of Tone's "revival," reconciling the popular stream of constitutional and cultural nationalism with Tone's

³⁰ "The *Nation* and Mr. Devin Reilly: To the Editor of the *Freeman*," *The Freeman's Journal*, January 11, 1848.

more radical tactics was a source of tension; where some like Reilly advocated for an adherence to Tone's violent republicanism, many more were eager to adopt Tone's passion for the nationalist cause and mythic heroism, while leaving aside his violent strategy.

The push to embrace Wolfe Tone as a nationalist icon proved successful. By the early 1870s, Tone secured a prominent place amongst the most revered nationalists. A vast number of references made to Tone, including a 1873 article in *The Freeman's Journal*, described him as such.

There are few patriots around whose honoured names crowd more memorable though melancholy associations connected with Irish nationality than that of Theobald Wolfe Tone...his anxious, unwearying, and noble exertions to ameliorate the cruel wrongs under which [Ireland] suffered, have marked him as one whose name shall ever live in the hearts of Irishmen. His simple grave, in the little churchyard at Bodenstown, has many and many a time been the object of loving interest.³¹

This veneration of Tone, and earlier tradition of commemoration around Bodenstown, increased considerably over the next several decades. Beginning in the 1870s, regular small-scale demonstrations led by local commemorative committees had sprung up to promote cultural nationalism across Ireland. These localized associations became instrumental in popularizing the history of Wolfe Tone and, alongside the Young Ireland Society, hosted lectures on Tone's life and held concerts performed in his name.³² They successfully erected memorials, staged rallies, and organized annual "pilgrimages" to Tone's grave.³³ Gary Owens explains that these symbols and rituals must not be understood as "superfluous accompaniments to the political process," as they played a meaningful role in political and nationalist affairs.³⁴

³¹ "The Grave of Wolfe Tone," *The Freeman's Journal*, September 15, 1873.

³² One such lecture, hosted on the anniversary of the birth of Wolfe Tone, promised "an address delivered on the life of Tone" to promote "a real National education." "National Concert," *The Freeman's Journal*, June 16, 1884.

³³ Ó Brion, "Commemorating 1798," 84.

³⁴ Owens, "Nationalist monuments in Ireland, c. 1870-1914: Symbolism and Ritual," 103-104.

In anticipation of the 1798 Uprising's centenary, The Wolfe Tone Memorial Fund Committee and the 'Ninety-eight Commemoration Committee were founded. By the late 1890s, however, the Irish Republican Brotherhood had devoted significant energy to organizing and recruiting, and it had infiltrated these committees as fronts for its republican activities.³⁵ The secret,³⁶ oath-bound society was committed to full separation of Ireland from England via physical force, with its members swearing allegiance to an Irish republic.³⁷ Their aim and strategy, however, garnered minimal support for the first several years after its founding in 1858. Irish electoral results continued to demonstrate the preference for constitutionally attained home rule.³⁸ Despite its fringe status, republican separatism persisted as the main opponent to constitutional nationalism through the last decade of the nineteenth-century. And while the constitutional-home rule Irish Parliamentary Party (IPP) would continue to dominate Irish elections until the 1916 Easter Rising, radical political currents began gaining traction and impacting broader politics in the late nineteenth century.³⁹ Therefore, the events organized by the commemorative committees in anticipation of the 1798 centenary became valuable occasions for nationalists of all stripes, though particularly the IRB, to advocate their programme and galvanize the people. "This year-long indulgence," Gary Owens explains, "was more than a colourful celebration; it was also a unique experiment in mass education," designed to "fix in the public mind an image of Ireland's revolutionary heritage."⁴⁰

³⁵ Woods, *Bodenstown Revisited*, 53; Ó Brion, "Commemorating 1798," 91.

³⁶ Historians have characterized the evolution and nature of the Irish Republican Brotherhood in a variety of ways. Where Tom Garvin states that pre-1870s, Fenianism "resembled nothing so much as a conspiratorial political party," Richard English describes Fenianism, during the same period, as having "a very public social quality, with visible demonstrations and gestures rather than revolutionary secrecy often enough being the norm." The "conviviality" of Fenianism, English continues, "in marching, enjoying picnics, holding public meetings, and so on" was the key to their public appeal in the 1860s. Garvin, *Evolution of Irish Nationalist Politics*, 68; English, *Irish Freedom*, 188.

³⁷ Feeney, *Sinn Féin*, 23.

³⁸ Feeney, *Sinn Féin*, 24.

³⁹ Eoin Ó. Broin, "The Arrival of Left Republicanism," in *Sinn Féin and the Politics of Left Republicanism*, 1st ed (Pluto Press, 2009), 89.

⁴⁰ Owens, "Nationalist monuments in Ireland, c. 1870-1914: Symbolism and Ritual," 106.

These local commemorative committees organized the centenary memorial for Wolfe Tone in Bodenstown. According to police reports, this event was “largely a Fenian affair” with “as many as 5,200 of the ten thousand present being identifiable as advanced nationalists.”⁴¹ Naturally, the centenary was seen as an opportunity to educate the public on an explicit nationalist programme and to mobilize a unified nationalist body, much like the United Irishmen.

On August 15, or “Wolfe Tone Day” as it was popularly known, a commemorative procession was attended by tens of thousands and has since been described as “the high point of the centenary celebrations, the biggest thing of its kind seen in Dublin for years.”⁴² In the same vein as the Bodenstown memorial, this event was distinctly political and consisted of a “monster IRB turn-out.”⁴³ At this procession, prominent Fenian John O’Leary delivered a speech, of which a considerable portion was dedicated to recounting the life and commending the deeds of Wolfe Tone.

In the context of 1898, the public face of the IRB was intentionally moderate so as to not alienate the constitutionally-inclined majority. Nevertheless, an undercurrent of the IRB’s republican values can be discerned in O’Leary’s praise of sacrificial nationalism: “To us Tone’s failure is grander than many a success: for he failed gloriously in a great attempt.” O’Leary emphasized the virtue inherent in dying for the nationalist cause—a foundational belief for those aiming to launch a revolutionary campaign. But given the public nature of this event, he reverted to a moderate message in his conclusion: “There are many lessons to be learned from this life of Tone, but, we do not mean to be controversial...here to-day. If we mean that Ireland should be free—and, I hope, we all mean that—we must become United Irishmen again, in a literal sense at

⁴¹ Woods, *Bodenstown Revisited*, 53-54.

⁴² While modern estimates vary, contemporaneous reports estimated one hundred thousand people took part in the procession. Owens, “Nationalist monuments in Ireland,” 113; Ó Brion, “Commemorating 1798,” 90.

⁴³ Ó Brion, “Commemorating 1798,” 90.

least, and, personally, I could wish that we were all United Irishmen in the National sense, too.”⁴⁴

As O’Leary demonstrated, the priority of late nineteenth-century Fenians was to establish the symbolic and emotional foundation of revolutionary nationalism, for which Wolfe Tone became a valuable rhetorical symbol.⁴⁵

In summary, by the mid-late nineteenth century, the broad strokes of Tone’s life had been taught and his sanctity secured, and therefore, ensuing nationalists needed only to position this history in relation to their own struggles. As each nationalist stream configured their interpretation of Wolfe Tone to complement their contemporary objectives, they revealed their nationalist priorities and rhetorical strategies.

A key development, however, can be traced to the final years of the nineteenth century. Despite continuing to receive popular support, constitutional nationalism began to waver. Scandal plagued IPP leader Charles Stewart Parnell, and his death in 1891, led to his party’s disintegration. This decline of parliamentary agitation was matched by a “striking growth” in non-parliamentary organizations such as the IRB.⁴⁶ Garvin notes that, while the 1890s appeared to be a period of passivity, it was actually a decade of intensive republican organization. These IRB efforts laid the groundwork for representative parliamentary politics to be displaced by more radical societies in the early years of the twentieth century.

iv. The Turn of the Century and Rise of Republicanism

Notwithstanding these IPP fractures and IRB schemes, all the same questions remained at the turn of the century. Would nationalists pursue home rule or uncompromising independence?

⁴⁴ “John O’Leary’s speech from the Wolfe Tone mass demonstration at St. Stephens Green, Dublin, August 15, 1898” *Dublin Daily Nation*. Cartlann Online Archive.

⁴⁵ Gary Owens’s observation further demonstrates a republican undercurrent of these demonstrations: “it is worth noting the language that the press sometimes used to describe nationalist demonstrations, especially those connected with the Tone monument. The ‘ranks of marching men’ who comprised the parades were ‘armies’ or at least ‘men who would make splendid soldiers’; they ‘occupied’ the city and ‘completely choked’ its traffic.” Owens, “Nationalist monuments in Ireland,” 110.

⁴⁶ Garvin, *Evolution of Irish Nationalist Politics*, 91.

Would their goals be attained through the parliament or through physical force? In 1905, activist and journalist Arthur Griffith founded Sinn Féin, not as a political party *per se*, but as a political pressure group and national movement committed to non-violence and increased Irish autonomy.⁴⁷ While under the banner of non-violent moderates, “it was then, and has always been, a mixture of intellectuals, political activists and revolutionaries,” often without any hard lines differentiating the various strands.⁴⁸ With this amalgamation of different ideologies, Sinn Féin underwent a number of radically different phases, with shifting objectives and leadership.⁴⁹ Nevertheless, it ultimately evolved into the Sinn Féin League, committed to advancing Griffith’s non-violent objective of achieving dual monarchy through electoral abstentionism from Westminster.⁵⁰

Simultaneously, Fenians within Sinn Féin strove to inculcate more extreme principles of separatism into the organization.⁵¹ In this transition, it became commonplace for Wolfe Tone to be reunited, so to speak, with the violent tactics that had often been sidelined in earlier decades. During the Wolfe Tone Demonstration in June 1906, Sinn Féin led a clear “anti-parliamentarian” demonstration. “There was no mincing of language...in dealing with Parliamentary Agitation,” an onlooker reported; parliamentary agitation, described as a “political fiasco,” “had proved itself a fallacious remedy.” “Stick to the Wolfe Tone principles,” the Sinn Féin representatives implored, thereby aligning Wolfe Tone (and Sinn Féin) with non-parliamentary strategies.⁵²

Similarly, at a 1907 public meeting debating Sinn Féin policy, P. O’Loughlin was paraphrased as saying that “every Home Ruler was a Unionist, and could be nothing else,” thus

⁴⁷ Garvin, *Evolution of Irish Nationalist Politics*, 105.

⁴⁸ Feeney, *Sinn Féin*, 10-11.

⁴⁹ Simply put, “Sinn Féin” was the title that a number of separate movements and organizations co-opted over the years.

⁵⁰ Ó Broin, *Sinn Féin and the Politics of Left Republicanism*, 179.

⁵¹ Richard Davis, *Arthur Griffith and Non-Violent Sinn Féin* (Anvil Books, 1974), 31.

⁵² “Sinn Féin, ‘The Old Movement’ Again”, Cork Anti-Parliamentarians,” *Irish Weekly Independent*, June 28, 1906.

discrediting the Home Rule movement as perpetuating Ireland's subordination through its connection with England.⁵³ To legitimize his assertions and the party for which O'Loughlin spoke, he claimed that "Wolfe Tone and Thomas Davis were also Sinn Féiners," thus underscoring Tone's violent republicanism and relating it to the political programme of Sinn Féin.⁵⁴

In 1910, the *Irish Freedom* newspaper was founded as a mouthpiece for the IRB. The paper quickly co-opted Tone as embodying physical force nationalism. In November 1910, Tone was evoked to discredit all ambitions aimed at anything short of full independence: "The freedom which is not worth fighting for and dying for is not worth having. Such 'freedom' the Irish people have possessed in the days of Wolfe Tone, but the brand for which we strive is the brand for which Tone's throat was mangled by the British Government."⁵⁵ This line of nationalism found expression in "fighting" and "dying" both for the cause and for the memory of Tone.

Public commemorations also propounded this brand of nationalism, though less intensely. At the 1913 annual pilgrimage to Bodinstown, Patrick Pearse delivered a seminal speech, declaring upon Tone's grave: "We have come here not merely to salute this noble dust and to pay our homage to the noble spirit of Tone," but "to renew our adhesion to the faith of Tone; to express once more our full acceptance of the gospel of Irish Nationalism which he was the first to formulate in worthy terms."⁵⁶ Pearse hoped that the commemoration would transcend the mere reverence of Tone; it was a strategic opportunity to galvanize Irishmen and inspire a particular

⁵³ Note the different meanings of "union": to be a *Unionist* refers to those wanting to maintain the 1801 Act of Union, thereby preserving Ireland's status with the UK; whereas *The United Irishmen* sought to unite all of Ireland against England, and to separate Ireland from the UK.

⁵⁴ "Dublin Sinn Féiners," *The Irish Weekly Independent*, July 27, 1907.

⁵⁵ "The Fianna," *Irish Freedom*, November 1910.

⁵⁶ Patrick Pearse, "An address delivered at the grave of Wolfe Tone in Bodinstown Churchyard, 22nd June 1913," (*C. G. Seavers*, c. 1917): 1-2.

nationalist programme. While he did not make an explicit call for arms, his and other reverential appeals to Wolfe Tone helped lay the moral and emotional groundwork for republicanism to proliferate: “We have come to the holiest place in Ireland; holier to us even than the place where Patrick sleeps in Down. Patrick brought us life, but this man died for us.”⁵⁷ Tone had earned this admiration, not by his politics or ideology, but by dying for Ireland. And with this eulogy for self-sacrifice and martyrdom, Pearse cemented a key psychological dimension requisite in physical-force nationalism. Finally, Pearse adds that Tone “has spoken for all time, and his voice resounds throughout Ireland, calling to us from this grave when we wander astray following other voices that ring less true,” subtly discrediting other uses of Tone in national symbolism.⁵⁸

Pearse’s speech coincided with a contentious moment in Irish politics: the introduction of the third Home Rule Bill. Despite being narrowly accepted by the House of Commons, the previous 1893 Home Rule Bill had been abandoned due to the House of Lords’ veto power, an ability revoked by the 1911 Parliament Act.⁵⁹ Therefore, acceptance of the 1912 Home Rule Bill the following year seemed imminent. Unionists, predominantly concentrated in the north-eastern counties of pre-partition Ulster, had staunchly opposed devolution. Apart from the religious dimension (which will be discussed later), Ulster unionists feared that a Dublin-based parliament would pass protectionist laws in favour of the agricultural sector (to which most of Ireland economically belonged) or implement disadvantageous land reforms that would minimize their property holdings. Home rule, Ulster unionists maintained, would impede the urban province’s industry and commerce.⁶⁰ It must be noted, however, that this bill proposed only “a meagre

⁵⁷ Pearse, “An address delivered at the grave of Wolfe Tone,” 1.

⁵⁸ Pearse, “An address delivered at the grave of Wolfe Tone,” 2.

⁵⁹ The first Home Rule bill was introduced in 1886, causing a permanent fissure within the Liberal party and was ultimately defeated in the House of Commons. The main difference between the first Home Rule Bill and the two subsequent Bills was that the latter promised to retain Irish representation in the House of Commons.

⁶⁰ Unionism, in an extreme minority, existed in the South where they were characterized by their Anglicanism, ownership of land, and their status as elites. In the north, however, they occupied all occupations and social classes,

measure of autonomy.”⁶¹ While transferring jurisdiction of most local affairs to the Irish parliament, Westminster would retain extensive authority.⁶²

Despite such a limited proposal of power, and a number of concessions offered, Unionist anxieties were not alleviated, and the resistance to home rule culminated in the militarization of Ulster. In January 1913, the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) was founded to resist devolution, and by September, when it was clear that the Home Rule Bill was indeed going to pass, the Provisional Government of Ulster was formed.⁶³ This shadow administration was prepared to take control in order to prevent Ulster from joining the Dublin parliament. The southern provinces reacted by establishing their own paramilitary organization, the Irish Volunteers, which were quickly infiltrated by the Fenians. By mid-1914, the UVF had over 100,000 members, and the Irish Volunteers numbered around 180,000. So when the Home Rule Bill eventually did pass, an explosive civil war seemed unavoidable. The outbreak of the First World War narrowly de-escalated the situation, as the conflict led to the suspension of the Act and an effective diversion of mass paramilitary efforts.⁶⁴

Before the outbreak of World War I redirected nationalist attention, however, the widespread militarization of Ulster and subsequent arming of the Volunteers was a principal nationalist preoccupation, and this tension pervaded references to Wolfe Tone; as civil war loomed, one of the most memorable battles and heroes of Ireland’s nationalist history was recalled. The earlier work of the nineteenth-century parliamentary agitators in shaping Tone’s

possessing “many characteristics of an ethnic.” Alan J. Ward, “Three Home Rule Bills and the Rise of Unionism,” *The Easter Rising: Revolution and Irish Nationalism*, 2nd ed. (Harlan Davidson Inc., 2003), 88-89.

⁶¹ Ó Brion, “The Rising of 1916,” 151.

⁶² Ó Brion notes that not even control of the police force would be immediately transferred and that the UK would (albeit vague) retain authority “over all persons, matters and things in Ireland.” Ó Brion, “The Rising of 1916,” 151.

⁶³ Note that this is not the first instance of popular unionist mobilisation. Take, for example, the mass signing of the Ulster Unionist Convention (1905). Ó. Broin, *Sinn Féin and the Politics of Left Republicanism*, 91.

⁶⁴ The majority of Irishmen were in support of the war effort, and supported the British forces during the war. Led by John Redmond, the participation of the Irish Volunteers in the war was part of a strategy to secure British support for the post-war installment of the Home Rule bill. Ó. Broin, *Sinn Féin and the Politics of Left Republicanism*, 91.

image proved valuable for these later republican nationalists. The romantic, heroic image of Tone as a martyr for Irish nationalism had been thoroughly cemented by then, so that, for many Irishmen, Tone was implicitly exalted and admired. Therefore, come the militarization of Ulster, he was firmly established as an icon for the Irish Volunteers, representing the taking-up of arms for the nationalist cause.

In these tumultuous years, many public-facing IRB references to Tone lost their moderate quality. Just weeks before the outbreak of the Great War came one explicitly republican oration by prominent IRB member, Thomas Clark. At the 1914 Bodinstown pilgrimage, the perception that Ireland was on the brink of a civil war saturated the Wolfe Tone commemoration; and in this climate, republican nationalists took advantage of the event to rouse support for an armed struggle. Clarke stated that “...to-day thousands of eyes are turning to this sacred spot, looking for signs that Wolfe Tone’s principles are still a vital force in our country.” These principles were of physical-force republicanism: “The time of speechmaking is rapidly passing,” Clarke declared. “The drilling and arming of the people of Ireland is what is going to count and what is going to be the determining factor as to just how our national ambition is going to be fulfilled.”⁶⁵ In this context of rising militarism, Tone became a valuable rhetorical tool for fulfilling their contemporary objectives, galvanizing popular support for the Volunteers.

That same month, the Wolfe Tone celebration in Belfast, described as “the largest on record,” continued in the same vein. Physical force nationalism was explicitly brought to the fore. In *Irish Freedom*, Fenian Ernest Blythe reportedly pronounced Wolfe Tone “a soldier who saw that freedom was to be won only with the sword.” That sword, Blythe continued, “must be used not to redress one or other particular grievance but to cut the Gordian knot and end in one

⁶⁵ “Tom Clarke’s speech from the annual Wolfe Tone commemoration at Bodinstown,” reported in the *Gaelic American*, July 11, 1914.

blow the whole system [of] English dominion in this country.”⁶⁶ Blythe clarified that this force of arms did not consist of a “readiness or determination to kill an enemy,” but rather “a willingness to suffer death for what a man believed to be right.”⁶⁷ *Irish Freedom* concluded its account of the event by calling for republicanism in honour of Tone.

Let no one who came [to the celebration] that day to honour the memory of Tone say the times were changed and that we would never again have the opportunity to strike a blow for Ireland. ‘Changed times’ had been the excuse of every hypocrite from time immemorial, and the man who came to a gathering such as that and was unwilling to accept Tone’s principles and walk in his footsteps was a coward and a hypocrite. The United Irishmen’s oath was then taken by those present, and the gathering afterwards dispersed.⁶⁸

As the IRB’s newspaper, *Irish Freedom* continued to capitalize on Wolfe Tone as a valuable symbol. In May 1914, the general national spirit and political atmosphere was described under the title “Wolfe Tone Pilgrimage”: “Not for generations has there been manifest such a spirit as we see abroad to-day. Rebellion stalks boldly, in open daylight, through the whole land...From Cork to Donegal, from Dublin to Galway, the men of Ireland flock to the call of the Nation. Company after company, battalion after battalion, of the army of Ireland are being drilled and armed, prepared for defence or aggression, as the need may arise, and in Ulster and Munster the preparations are directed against the enemy of both—England.”⁶⁹ Echoing its July publication, this edition of *Irish Freedom* drew the parallel between the 1914 atmosphere with the one that precipitated Wolfe Tone’s 1798 rebellion.

This fusion of Wolfe Tone and republicanism was seemingly persuasive. In 1915, rather idiosyncratically as he was a M.P. for the Irish Parliamentary Party, Arthur Lynch wrote that, “More and more, as the Home Rule debate proceeds I am filled with anxiety as to the final

⁶⁶ “Wolfe Tone Celebration in Belfast,” *Irish Freedom*, July 1914.

⁶⁷ “Wolfe Tone Celebration in Belfast,” *Irish Freedom*, July 1914.

⁶⁸ “Wolfe Tone Celebration in Belfast,” *Irish Freedom*, July 1914.

⁶⁹ “Wolfe Tone Pilgrimage,” *Irish Freedom*, May 1914.

result.” Rejecting the limited autonomy granted by the proposed devolution bill, he stated, “The more I examine the matter.... the more repugnant it becomes to me this Bill to dismember Ireland. Home Rule on such terms would be a mockery of the struggle of Wolfe Tone.” Lynch proceeded to list “The Hopes” for Ireland’s future, including “Ireland able to honour Wolfe Tone in a great forward step.” In contrast to these aspirations, “The Prospects” of home rule was foreseen as “The deeds of Wolfe Tone,” and of other historic heroes, being “made a mockery and a reproach.”⁷⁰ By conjuring Tone, Lynch portrayed home rule as a ridicule and betrayal of Tone’s life and principles.

This particular co-option of Wolfe Tone would slowly become the standard through the coming years of political turmoil, solidifying his association with republican separatism. While the outbreak of the Great War diverted the attention of many nationalists (as the vast majority of Irish Volunteers were quick to support the war effort), others saw England’s weakness as Ireland’s strength.⁷¹ An IRB faction, headed by figures such as Tom Clarke, Patrick Pearse and, later, James Connolly, were eager not to waste this opportunity and organized an armed insurrection.⁷² On Easter Monday 1916, the Republican Army launched numerous small-scale attacks across Dublin.⁷³ They quickly seized control of the General Post Office (GPO), which, once the proclamation of the Irish Republic was read by Pearse on its doorsteps, would become the short-lived home of the provisional government.⁷⁴

⁷⁰ Arthur Lynch, “Ireland’s future, Causes for Anxiety,” *The Irish Independent*, May 19 1915.

⁷¹ The members of the Irish Volunteers who split off to join the war effort came under the new title of National Volunteers, following Irish Parliamentary Party (IPP) leader John Redmond who declared Ireland’s support of the war. The other, much depleted faction, retained the name Irish Volunteers under chief of staff, Eoin MacNeill, though the organization was quickly infiltrated by the IRB, namely, Pearse. Garvin, *Evolution of Irish Nationalist Politics*, 108; English, *Irish Freedom*, 261.

⁷² Eoin MacNeill, leader of the Volunteers in opposition to Redmond’s army, was not informed of the Easter Rising.

⁷³ Though uprisings occurred across Ireland, the rebellion was largely concentrated in Dublin.

⁷⁴ For simplicity, the insurrectionists here will be referred to as the republican army. The main forces, however, were the remaining Volunteer faction (those who followed the Rising commanders’ instructions) and, to a lesser extent, the Irish Citizen Army (ICA). The ICA, for which Connolly was the leader, was founded in the context of the Dublin lockout (1913). While initially focused on class, the ICA became intertwined with nationalism as their commitment to transferring the moral and material ownership of Ireland to the people was incompatible with the Union.

Naturally, Tone's legacy and persuasive punch was advantageous to the republican forces. The Irish Citizen Army (ICA), a socialist militia that participated in the Rising, sought recruits by publishing the proclamation, "To the People of Ireland." Under this heading, the ICA introduced itself with Tone's words: "Our Freedom must be had at all hazards." The organization's aim, they explained, "is to sink the difference of Birth, Privilege and Creed under the common name of the Irish People." Benefitting from the popular knowledge and interpretation of Tone's life, the ICA summarized their ideology in a simple evocation of Ireland's dead nationalists: "[the ICAs] policy is to achieve that for which Theobald Wolfe Tone died, and John Mitchel suffered."⁷⁵

Ultimately, the fighting between the republican army and Dublin police (soon reinforced by British government forces) lasted a week, culminating in approximately 450 deaths and 2,500 wounded.⁷⁶ The army's diminished capacity, with the participation of around fifteen hundred in all, was incapable of defeating the substantial opposing forces.⁷⁷ While unquestionably a military failure, the 1916 Easter Rising's impact on nationalist politics cannot be understated. Initially, since many if not most of the casualties were civilians, the republicans were received with mixed reactions. However, Britain's punitive reaction tipped popular opinion in favour of the rebels; exhaustive war-time arrests and execution of key leaders was seen as another iteration of British brutality and the harm of foreign rule in Ireland. As Garvin notes, the most significant effects "were symbolic and psychological rather than military."⁷⁸ Alan J. Ward claims that this symbolic dimension was the rebels' intention: the leaders did not genuinely expect to defeat the British Army, but instead to undertake a heroic gesture of voluntary martyrdom to reinvigorate popular

⁷⁵ John Mitchel was a Young Irelander active in the mid-nineteenth century. Irish Citizen Army, "To the People of Ireland," *City Printing Works*, 1916. National Library of Ireland.

⁷⁶ Ward, *The Easter Rising*, 13.

⁷⁷ They anticipated many more men to assemble in Dublin, but due to internal disputes and conflicting instructions, they were short about three-fourths of the expected manpower. Ward, *The Easter Rising*, 4.

⁷⁸ Garvin, *Evolution of Irish Nationalist Politics*, 113.

republican nationalism.⁷⁹ Indeed, the rebels soon became martyrs, and support for the republican cause swelled.

The youngest man executed in the aftermath of the rebellion, Edward Daly, was one such republican whose death helped turn the tide in support of the insurgents. Visiting her brother in jail upon his sentencing, Madge Daly illustrated the same fusion of self-sacrifice and virtue as it had been established by the symbolism of Wolfe Tone. She recounted, “My first words were: ‘Oh! Ned! Why are they giving you the highest honours? You must have done great work to earn a place with Tone and Emmet and all the others...Speaking of himself, he said he was glad and proud to die for his country,” and she “told him how proud our uncle, our mother and our sisters would be when they heard that England had given him a martyr’s crown.”⁸⁰ This exchange, whether faithfully relayed or not, confirms that dying for the independence of Ireland and righteous heroism had been successfully conflated.

Ultimately, the British response to the Rising effectively united the Irish people in support of militant separatism, striking a fatal blow to conservative home rule politics.⁸¹ Despite the implementation of martial law, republican nationalism continued to muster support as the movement developed into a “stronger and more cohesive” force.⁸² In order to maintain their voter base, Irish political parties had to adapt their programmes to this ignited nationalist spirit. Notwithstanding leader John Redmond’s efforts, the Irish Parliamentary Party was unable to shake their image as a conservative home rule party, and Sinn Féin rose in its place.⁸³

⁷⁹ Ward, *The Easter Rising*, 10.

⁸⁰ Madge Daly quoted in MacLochlainn, Piaras F, and Kilmainham Jail Restoration Society, *Last Words: Letters and Statements of the Leaders Executed after the Rising at Easter 1916* (Kilmainham Jail Restoration Society, 1971), 70.

⁸¹ Those united in support of militant separatism refers, of course, to predominantly southern Irish people and nationalists in the north—many Irish people (particularly Ulster unionists and Protestant landlords) were never in support of parliamentary nationalism, let alone this new wave of republican nationalism. Ó Broin, *Sinn Féin and the Politics of Left Republicanism*, 92.

⁸² Ó Broin, *Sinn Féin and the Politics of Left Republicanism*, 113.

⁸³ Despite the fact that neither Griffith nor the organization participated in the 1916 uprising, it quickly became known as the Sinn Féin rising. The media had disparagingly used this term to suggest the Rising’s lack of support.

Before the Easter Rising, the polar forces of the IPP and IRB had dominated the national movement, while Sinn Féin had failed to establish itself as a viable third option.⁸⁴ In this post-Rising climate, however, the party underwent rapid transformation and expansion. The new constitution stated that “Sinn Féin aims at securing the international recognition of Ireland as an independent Irish Republic” and that this goal would be achieved by “any and every means available to render impotent the power of England to hold Ireland in subjection.”⁸⁵ This renewed and centralized national party secured an overwhelming majority in the 1918 general election, after which the Sinn Féin candidates adhered to their pledge and abstained from taking their seats at Westminster. Thus, in January 1919, Sinn Féin rejected the British government’s legitimacy in Ireland; by establishing an Irish parliament, or Dáil Éireann, and producing the Declaration of Independence, they proclaimed an Irish Republic.

As Sinn Féin organized their newly formed government, the military wing of the republican movement—the IRB and the Volunteers, who were now taking on the name Irish Republican Army—slowly initiated a guerilla war against Britain, which was to become the Irish War of Independence (1919-1921). They launched a campaign targeting first, the Royal Irish Constabulary (RIC), and in 1920, the Black and Tans and Auxiliary Division. In July 1921, after approximately 2,000 deaths and weeks of negotiation, the Irish-Anglo Treaty was signed by Sinn Féin delegates Arthur Griffith and Michael Collins, thereby ending the war. The Treaty, later endorsed in the 1922 election, established the partition of the island, granting Northern Ireland home rule. The south, demanding greater autonomy, became a dominion by the name of the Irish Free State.

However, the Irish term relating to self-sufficiency and Irish identity resonated with people and helped them identify what the Rising was about. Ó Broin, *Sinn Féin and the Politics of Left Republicanism*, 182.

⁸⁴ Ó Broin, *Sinn Féin and the Politics of Left Republicanism*, 181.

⁸⁵ Sinn Féin constitution quoted in Ó Broin, *Sinn Féin and the Politics of Left Republicanism*, 184.

This achievement was not celebrated by all nationalists. Where the pro-Treaty Irish Free State believed that implementing the Treaty upheld democracy and reflected the people's desire as expressed in the 1922 election, most IRA members rejected its legitimacy. They pointed to the war-time imposition of the Treaty, arguing that there could be no free vote while there was a threat of re-occupation and, therefore, that the Irish Free State was really a puppet government doing Britain's bidding. Furthermore, the partition of Ireland, and the south's dominion status under the symbolic banner of the UK, was unacceptable to many of these advanced nationalists who were still committed to a unified, independent Irish republic.

And so, just as the War of Independence ended, the Civil war began between the Irish Free State and anti-Treaty IRA forces. In this new iteration of guerilla warfare, the ideological fractures among nationalists gave way to another crisis for which republican forces had to rally support. Historian Jason K. Knirk notes that anti-Treaty republicans "had every reason to focus on symbolism, as this was the area in which the Treaty most clearly fell short of Irish national aspirations."⁸⁶ For this reason, Wolfe Tone became particularly attractive to the anti-Treaty branch.⁸⁷ In the preceding years, references to Tone had successfully aligned him with republican nationalism that endorsed physical force—the stream that had gained significant popular support in the post-1916 context. Therefore, the IRA capitalized on this association and, eliciting the mythic image of Ireland's heroic past, framed the Treaty as a shameful betrayal of Wolfe Tone.

Anti-Treaty members sought to conflate the Treaty with Ireland's continued servitude to England, a dynamic they saw evident in article 4, which required Irish members of parliament to

⁸⁶ Jason K. Knirk, *Imagining Ireland's Independence: the debates over the Anglo-Irish treaty of 1921* (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2007), 135.

⁸⁷ Though apparently to a lesser extent, Treaty supporters also co-opted Wolfe Tone for their side of the war. In December 1922, *The Drogheda Independent* published an article defending the Treaty: "Ireland has achieved a measure of freedom beyond the dream of many of her most revered strivers after national liberty." And, unlike the interpretation of the anti-treaty forces, this author claims that the Treaty "would have satisfied Wolfe Tone and the men of 1898." "Ireland's Charter," *The Drogheda Independent*, December 30, 1922.

pledge fidelity to the British king.⁸⁸ This declaration was intolerable for those who had defined their nationalism by its thorough opposition to England's material and symbolic domination over the island. One piece of anti-Treaty propaganda from 1922 quotes prominent British officials (naturally opposed to Irish republicanism) followed by the statement, "For these ideals... the Free State Army is fighting[:] To crush the Republic of Ireland— to save the British Empire." This comparison between the joint aims of Britain and the Irish Free State was contrasted with quotes from Wolfe Tone and other republican nationalists, namely Tone's desire "To break the connection with England," which were the "ideals" for which "the Soldiers of the Republic are fighting to-day."⁸⁹ Therefore, a simple classification was conjured: loyalty to the Irish Free State was loyalty to Britain, whereas a commitment to the IRA's anti-Treaty campaign was a commitment to the principles of the most revered nationalists of Irish history.

This binary was re-printed in a number of posters and pamphlets. In response to the title, "THE WAY TO FREE IRELAND," two pathways were imagined: the first, by Tone, "Fight to break the connection with England"; and the second, by pro-Treaty chief of staff Richard Mulcahy, "Wrong... fight to establish that connection."⁹⁰

Eamon de Valera, leader of the anti-Treaty side, also harkened back to Tone. After explaining the principles that informed his nationalism and his interpretation of Sinn Féin's core values, he stated, "if this is not plain and concrete enough for those who will not see our objective," the IRA defended "not the constitution Wolfe Tone died to abolish, but the

⁸⁸ Article 4 states that, "The oath to be taken by Members of the Parliament of the Free State shall be in the following form: 'I . . . do solemnly swear true faith and allegiance to the Constitution of the Irish Free State as by law established and that I will be faithful to King George V., his heirs and successors by law in virtue of the common citizenship of Ireland with Great Britain and her adherence to and membership of the group of nations forming the British Commonwealth of Nations.'" "The Anglo-Irish Treaty, As signed on December 6, 1921 by representatives of the Irish and British Governments," December 6, 1921.

⁸⁹ "Ideals: Who is the enemy? What is the People's Will?" anti-Treaty propaganda, 1922, National Library of Ireland.

⁹⁰ "The Way To Free Ireland," anti-Treaty handbill, c. 1922-1923. National Library of Ireland.

constitution Wolfe Tone died to obtain—Independence; full and absolute independence for this Island.”⁹¹ Therefore, De Valera and these other IRA members deployed Wolfe Tone as a figure of uncompromising nationalism whose principles were betrayed by the Treaty.

This rhetorical strategy seems intuitive; Irish republicans greatly profited from the Young Irelanders’ appropriation of Wolfe Tone as a beloved icon of Irish history. Once their physical-force, separatist movement had gained traction in the early twentieth century, Irish republicans had a revolutionary icon primed for rhetorical use. With the IRA’s movement waving the banner of Tone and other dead nationalist heroes, supporting republican nationalism was to honour these martyrs’ contributions and continue their revolutionary efforts.

In summary, this chapter illustrates the evolution of nationalist appropriation of Wolfe Tone, tracing both parliamentary and republican nationalists’ interpretation of Tone’s symbolic meaning and rhetorical significance through the nineteenth century to the end of the civil war. That these interpretations functioned, sometimes explicitly, as a tool for recruitment, rousing an emotional commitment to the nationalist cause. Yet, although the romantic rendition of Tone’s history in the 1840s proved influential, the conflation of Wolfe Tone with a constitutional stream of national agitation lost its sway as republican nationalism gained traction. Therefore, despite the far-reaching and diverse co-option of Wolfe Tone, this analysis also demonstrates that, as republican nationalists came to dominate, so did their distinct interpretation of Wolfe Tone as a figure of Irish physical-force separatism and heroism.

⁹¹ Eamon De Valera, “Who Stands for the Sovereignty of the Irish People?” *Whitely and Wright*, 1923. National Library of Ireland.

Chapter 2

The tumultuous history of Irish nationalism between the 1840s and 1923 saw profound ideological splits between nationalists. Disputes regarding method (parliamentary agitation or violent resistance) and objective (devolution or separatism) proliferated during the period. Despite these foundational disagreements, anti-sectarianism emerged as a clear and unwavering throughline, permeating Irish nationalism and transcending faction. Representations of Wolfe Tone illustrate this persistent theme, as references to him across nationalist teachings emphasised his commitment to deconstructing religious bigotry.

i. Wolfe Tone's Antisectarianism

During Wolfe Tone's life in the eighteenth century, religion determined access to economic and political power. The socio-economic disparity between Irish Protestants and Catholics found its roots in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. To distill a long and complex history, a series of Tudor conquests and land seizures displaced Gaelic lords and native communities whose land was reallocated to loyal Protestant settlers from England and Scotland.⁹² In the ensuing decades, Protestant Ascendancy rose as wealth and political privilege became concentrated in these newcomers' hands. Confiscation of Catholic land persisted, and the Protestant-controlled Irish Parliament passed legislation making Catholicism a barrier to equal

⁹² This policy of land confiscation and settlement known as "plantation" politics began in Ulster before spreading south to Wexford, Longford, Leitrim, and Connaught. The Nine-Years War and subsequent "flight of the earls" in 1607 expedited this process.

political rights.⁹³ The seventeenth century saw the continued disenfranchisement of Catholics, and the entrenchment of the Protestant Ascendancy's power.⁹⁴

In the 1790s, the United Irishmen sought to reconcile these divisions in an effort to amalgamate nationalist support. Ascendancy-born, Wolfe Tone was on the frontlines of this effort: not only was he a prominent member of the United Irishmen, he was also a chief strategist and secretary to the Catholic Committee, positions he used to advocate for Catholic emancipation. In fact, as Marianne Elliott notes, "it is not republican separatism that Tone considered his most important contribution to the history of Ireland, but his effort to heal its religious divisions," and "it was as a Catholic campaigner rather than a United Irishman that [he] was considered dangerous by authorities."⁹⁵ In August 1791, Tone wrote his most celebrated and widely read work, *Argument on Behalf of the Catholics of Ireland*.⁹⁶ He addressed Irish Protestants, in particular the Ulster Dissenters,⁹⁷ who felt subjugated by the Protestant elite but were still wary of the Catholic populace.⁹⁸ Tone therefore confronted Protestant concerns about Catholics gaining full civil and legal rights, and systematically dispelled these anxieties.

My argument is simply this: That Ireland, as deriving her Government from another country, requires a strength in the people which may enable them, if necessary, to

⁹³ For more on land confiscation, see the 1652 Act of Settlement, implemented after Oliver Cromwell's 1649 reprisal campaign. For more on political discrimination, see the 1690s Penal Laws which (though inconsistently applied) implemented sectarian segregation and persecution, including ousting Catholics from their seats in Parliament, prohibiting disenfranchising Catholics and denying them the right to enter a number of professions. Finally, for Gaelic cultural suppression, see the Statutes of Kilkenny and the Acts of Supremacy and Uniformity. Ward, "England and Ireland Before the Union of 1801," in *The Easter Rising*; English, "Ireland before 1800," in *Irish Freedom*.

⁹⁴ The Protestant-Ascendancy, also known as the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy or the Anglican-Ascendancy, did not extend to all branches of protestantism (e.g., Irish Presbyterians, Quakers, and Baptists). See footnote 97.

⁹⁵ Elliott, "Anti-Popery and the Rise of Presbyterian Radicalism" in *Wolfe Tone*, 111.

⁹⁶ Nancy J. Curtin described the pamphlet as a "phenomenal best seller for the time, with sales reaching 6,000 by early 1792," noting that "Tone's effort did much to overcome prejudices in Belfast." Nancy J. Curtin, *The United Irishmen: Popular Politics in Ulster and Dublin, 1791–1798* (Oxford University Press, 1998), 44.

⁹⁷ "Dissenters" refers to Irish Protestants who did not ascribe to the Anglican Church of Ireland. Composed predominantly of Presbyterians descending from Scottish settlers, and in smaller numbers, Irish Quakers, Baptists, Methodists, and French Huguenots, these branches formed communities in Ireland. Though largely targeting Catholics, the Penal Laws also discriminated against Dissenters, and the Ascendancy regarded them as a potential threat to the established order.

⁹⁸ Elliott, "Anti-Popery and the Rise of Presbyterian Radicalism" in *Wolfe Tone*, 126.

counteract the influence of that Government...and [that] no reform is honourable, practicable, efficacious, or just, which does not include, as a fundamental principle, the extension of elective franchise to the Roman Catholics, under modifications hereafter to be mentioned.⁹⁹

Later, he asked, “Shall we be content to remain in our present oppressed and inglorious state, unknown and unheard-of in Europe, the prey of England, the laughing-stock of the knaves, who plunder us? Or shall we temperately and constitutionally exert our power to procure a complete and radical emancipation to our country, by a reform in the representation of the people?”¹⁰⁰

While Tone’s commitment to constitutional tactics would soon falter, he clearly linked the continued subordination of Ireland to the subjugation of Catholics, and consequently, the emancipation of the country with emancipation of Catholics. He demanded an alleviation of “Protestant bigotry,” pleading, “Give [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*.”¹⁰¹ Ultimately, he not only launched a moral argument centred on Catholic emancipation, but a strategic one: he believed an alliance of Irishmen across sectarian lines, particularly between aggrieved Catholics and radical Presbyterians, was necessary for dismantling the Ascendancy and achieving self-determination in Ireland.

During the 1798 Uprising and in its immediate aftermath, this ideal of a religiously-unified Ireland was sidelined by loyalist publishers in favour of more sensational, sectarian stories. By depicting the rebellion as a popish plot that sought to violently eradicate Protestantism in Ireland, this propaganda campaign portrayed sectarian intolerance as the rebels’

⁹⁹ Theobald Wolfe Tone, “An Argument on the Behalf of the Catholics of Ireland,” 1791, 12.

¹⁰⁰ Theobald Wolfe Tone, “An Argument on the Behalf of the Catholics of Ireland,” 1791, 17.

¹⁰¹ Theobald Wolfe Tone, “An Argument on the Behalf of the Catholics of Ireland,” 1791, 20-21.

main motive, thereby delegitimizing the Uprising's *raison d'être* and equipping Protestant loyalists with justification for excluding Catholic Emancipation in the Union settlement.¹⁰²

ii. The Religious Character of Irish Nationalism

Nevertheless, Wolfe Tone's anti-sectarianism became a cornerstone of nationalist appeals. Before analyzing such evocations, however, the religious character of Irish nationalism in the late-nineteenth century should be discussed. Before the 1801 Union, the Irish Catholic Church did not enjoy much power, nor were Irish Catholics particularly devout. Still, over the course of the nineteenth century, the church became a much more influential institution, and Catholicism became a significant feature of Irish identity.¹⁰³ After 1801, Irish Catholicism "was increasingly tied to perceptions of justice and the nation. Religious self-assertion and the achievement of catholic rights were fast becoming a form of national expression."¹⁰⁴

Key nationalists of all stripes regarded Catholicism as central to nationalist politics and identity. Home rulers, who enjoyed the support of the Catholic Church as of 1881, recognized the centrality of religion, as they believed addressing Catholic concerns was a foundational nationalist responsibility. For example, two of the most prominent home rule activists, Isaac Butt and Parnell, were themselves Protestant and propounded unity between Irish Catholics and Protestants for the nationalist cause.¹⁰⁵

On the opposite end of the nationalist spectrum, republican separatists shared this religious quality. While some clergymen had a hand in nineteenth-century nationalism at a local level,¹⁰⁶ the Catholic Church in Ireland explicitly denounced republicans' militant politics and

¹⁰² Whelan, "'98 After '98," 134-135.

¹⁰³ Ward, *The Easter Rising*, 31.

¹⁰⁴ John Fulton, *The Tragedy of Belief: Division, Politics, and Religion in Ireland* (Clarendon Press, 1991), 76.

¹⁰⁵ And, Butt and Parnell were Protestant both Protestants from elite Anglo-Irish families. McCaffrey, "Irish Nationalism and Irish Catholicism," 526.

¹⁰⁶ The 1879-1882 Land War, for example, saw the support of many clergymen. Simplified, the Land War consisted of rural Catholic tenants leading agrarian agitation against landlords (majority of whom were Protestant) to secure

strategy.¹⁰⁷ Apparently undeterred by official condemnation, the Fenians were predominantly loyal Catholics who did not disguise their religiosity. Their writing, speeches, and public displays were often steeped in Catholic teachings and tradition. Beyond their personal convictions, they valued Catholic concerns. For example, radical republican John Mitchel, though himself not a Catholic, saw their grievances as central to the nationalist struggle.¹⁰⁸ In short, nationalists closely identified Catholicism with their broader nationalist movements; by foregrounding Catholicism, they aimed to redress the systemic economic, political, and cultural disparities that England's rule in Ireland perpetuated. Catholicism, as Richard English puts it, was "one of the central languages of cultural communication and meaning within nationalist Ireland."¹⁰⁹

As has been discussed in the previous chapter, religion was also an established component of unionist identity long before the first Home Rule bill was proposed. Ward explains that the Ascendancy "came to interpret the union as a fundamental constitutional pact between themselves and Britain by which the latter would defend the economic, social, religious, and political supremacy of the Ascendancy Irish...Before the union, Irish Protestants saw themselves as the Irish nation. After the Union, they could more properly be described as a Protestant settlement, and the Irish nation came to mean almost exclusively the Catholic Irish."¹¹⁰ Therefore, beyond formally reconstructing the state, the 1801 Act of Union reconfigured century-old religious dynamics, transformations which persisted into the twentieth century.

The ubiquitous unionist epithet "Home Rule is Rome Rule" illustrates prevalent nineteenth-century Protestant anxieties regarding devolution proposals. Unionist opposition to home rule was, as they saw it, a resistance to "papist tyranny," which alongside "ignorance" and

land reform. Overall, however, most clergy were divided, with many wary of the Land League's militarization. And before 1881, most were ambiguous on home rule. English, *Irish Freedom*, 214.

¹⁰⁷ The Catholic Church maintained this position through the period at hand. English, *Irish Freedom*, 215.

¹⁰⁸ English, *Irish Freedom*, 214.

¹⁰⁹ English, *Irish Freedom*, 215.

¹¹⁰ Ward, *The Easter Rising*, 29.

“subversion,” was embodied by Irish nationalism.¹¹¹ Naturally, with the association between Irish Catholicism and nationalism growing more intertwined, a concern developed amongst Protestant unionists that being ruled by a Catholic majority parliament would disrupt their privileged minority status.

Historian Richard English gives credibility to these anxieties in his 2006 book, *Irish Freedom: The History of Nationalism in Ireland*. He, like most other historians, identifies Irish nationalism as being distinctly Catholic. English goes further, however, in suggesting that Irish nationalism was inherently antagonistic towards Protestants. When discussing “the central argument of this book,” English identifies the nationalist movement as “clearly aware of its explicit or implied enemies,” which included “non-Catholics.”¹¹² Elsewhere, he describes not only Catholic faith but “supremacism” as successfully “ennobling” a self-image among mid-late nineteenth century nationalists.¹¹³ He goes on to state that there was a prevalent “exclusivist quality” amongst nationalists and implies that the Catholic nature of nationalism (and later reiterations of this sentiment) “seem to rule Protestants out of Irishness altogether.”¹¹⁴ Thus, English tends to promote a representation of Irish republican nationalism as being uniquely Catholic and religiously intolerant, if not hostile toward Protestants.

To be clear, *Irish Freedom* is a valuable source on Irish history, offering an exhaustive and extensively researched overview of Irish nationalism, touching on causes, personalities, and cultural dimensions behind the movement. Indeed, the book has received a number of awards and widespread praise. Others such as John Borgonovo, however, have noted English’s “antagonism towards Irish separatism.”¹¹⁵ Similarly, historian John Regan observed that

¹¹¹ McCaffrey, “Irish Nationalism and Irish Catholicism,” 529.

¹¹² English, *Irish Freedom*, 226.

¹¹³ English, *Irish Freedom*, 218.

¹¹⁴ English, *Irish Freedom*, 219.

¹¹⁵ John Borgonovo, review of *Irish Freedom: The History of Nationalism in Ireland*, by Richard English, *Saothar* 32 (2007): 101.

throughout English's book "runs the thread of a barely concealed moral argument, which seeks to undermine rather than to understand mainstream separatism...lurking amid the interpretation there labours an obsession that separatist nationalism primarily should be understood as the agent of mobilised Catholicism predisposed to extreme acts and extreme ideas."¹¹⁶ While English does point to other personal, economic, and historical forces behind Irish nationalism, his primary lens for the analysis is Catholicism. This characterization of and emphasis on the Catholic dimension of Irish nationalism may distort the nature and ambitions of late nineteenth-century nationalist movements, overlooking some important nuance.

Historian Lawrence J. McCaffrey offers a different interpretation of nationalist sectarianism. The Young Irelanders, he explains, "pleaded for the union of Anglo-Irish and Celt, Protestant and Catholic in a common struggle against Anglo-Saxon political and cultural tyranny."¹¹⁷ McCaffrey further explains that even the Fenians, as early as 1867 in their proclamation of an Irish Republic demonstrated their commitment to a liberal democratic, non-sectarian Ireland.¹¹⁸

ii. Wolfe Tone, a Symbol of Unity: Nationalism and Ideals of Toleration

The nationalist appropriation of Wolfe Tone bolsters McCaffrey's assessment, indicating more religious tolerance among nationalists than what is accounted for by English. In the first several decades after the 1840s, an effort was made by a variety of nationalist streams to bridge the divide between Irish Protestants and Catholics, thereby fostering nationalist support. And in that effort, reference was often made to Wolfe Tone who personified the compatibility between Irish nationalism and Protestantism. One channel for this argument was *The Irish People*, the

¹¹⁶ John Regan, review of *Irish Freedom: The History of Nationalism in Ireland*, by Richard English, *Reviews in History* 704 (2008).

¹¹⁷ McCaffrey, "Irish Nationalism and Irish Catholicism," 526.

¹¹⁸ McCaffrey, "Irish Nationalism and Irish Catholicism," 526.

IRB newspaper, described as “The organ of uncompromising nationalism”¹¹⁹ and more recently as “a Fenian mouthpiece.”¹²⁰ Between its inception in 1863 and its suppression only two years later, it was headed by prominent IRB men, aiming to advance a largely separatist and physical-force programme.

In 1864 *The Irish People* published the speeches from the Saint Patrick’s Day celebration. At the event, a speaker recounted the history of Tone and the United Irishmen: “Theobald Wolfe Tone, a name synonymous with liberty, was the principle founder of the United Irishmen. Protestants, Catholics, and Presbyterians now joined hand in hand for the cause which they all espoused.” This, the transcriber noted, he was received with “Great applause”¹²¹ Later, the chairman of the event, Mr. MacDonnell, again recalled Wolfe Tone’s anti-sectarianism: Tone “trusted that those cursed barriers which kept men of different religions from meeting with one another in the sacred cause of their country were rent in pieces.” MacDonnell expressed that he, “as a Roman Catholic would die rather than abandon the faith in which he had been reared; but as an Irishman in politics, he could not nor would he ever recognise religious differences.” He reminded the audience that “They should not forget that those who did most, and risked most, and suffered most for our country, were Dissenters,” and he was sure “that none present were ignorant of the religious as well as the political faith of Theobald Wolfe Tone...The altar of liberty is the altar where all true Irishmen irrespective of religious differences, can meet and plight their vows, and offer up their blood, in the sacred cause of Irish freedom.”¹²²

This sentiment is echoed across *The Irish People*’s other articles, which, notably, were chiefly edited by John O’Leary, a staunch separatist, or as Richard English describes him, a

¹¹⁹ “Souvenir Programme of Anniversary Celebration, Round Room, Rotunda,” *Dublin P. Mahon*, November 26, 1912.

¹²⁰ English, *Irish Freedom*, 182.

¹²¹ *The Irish People*, March 26, 1864.

¹²² *The Irish People*, March 26, 1864.

“zealot.”¹²³ In an 1865 letter to the editor, the author wrote, “we are of one race but the difference in religion to divide us.” The true division, this writer claimed, was not in the doctrine which commands of both to “LOVE ONE ANOTHER” but rather, in “England’s policy whose great maxim is ‘DIVIDE AND CONQUER.’”¹²⁴ Emulating the principles of Wolfe Tone, the writer declared that “nothing short of absolute accomplishment of the independence of our country could bring greater joy to the heart of every good and true Irishman than to see Protestants and Catholics standing shoulder to shoulder in a grand struggle for the attainment of that great object.” To demonstrate that the abolition of sectarian division was possible, the writer harkened back to Wolfe Tone as a Protestant Irishman who had “been *loyal to Ireland*.”¹²⁵

In a final example of anti-sectarian sentiment from the IRB newspaper *The Irish People*, a letter to the editor, written under the latin pseudonym “Vi Et Armis” (meaning “force of arms”), echoes this sentiment: “Every Irishman who has an earnest desire to see his country a Nation, and is willing to give a helping hand when the ‘long, long wished out will come,’ is welcome to our ranks, no matter what his creed may be. Though differing in religion, Ireland is our common mother, England is our common enemy. ‘Tis the duty, therefore, of both Catholic and Protestant to unite against the common Foe.”¹²⁶ Once again, Wolfe Tone was evoked: “How were Irish Protestants treated when they took part with the *people*? Were they shown more lenity than their Catholic confederate, by ‘Protestant England?’ ... Was not Wolfe Tone done to death?”¹²⁷ Thus, these physical-force nationalists explained that England would not favour Irishmen on the basis of creed when their nation’s independence was at stake; in recalling the

¹²³ This term is very frequently used throughout the book to describe separatists. English, *Irish Freedom*, 183.

¹²⁴ De L’Abbaye, “Letter to the Editor of The Irish People,” *The Irish People*, April 15, 1865, 11.

¹²⁵ Furthermore, the writer attempts to dispel Protestant concerns of a possible “Catholic ascendancy,” stating, “Will not this carry conviction to the minds of our Protestant fellow-countrymen that the Catholics of Ireland are not a ‘priest ridden’ people, and that Irish nationalism is not ‘anti-Protestant,’ or anti-anything but English authority in Ireland?” De L’Abbaye, “Letter to the Editor of The Irish People,” *The Irish People*, April 15, 1865.

¹²⁶ *The Irish People*, April 29, 1865.

¹²⁷ *The Irish People*, April 29, 1865.

execution of Wolfe Tone, they argued that Protestants should not be under the impression that they had a privileged nationalist status, urging them to join the armed struggle.

In the more moderate, unionist leaning newspaper *The Irish Times*, the record from a 1871 Home Government Association meeting was published. Unlike the more radical republican separatists platformed in *The Irish People*, Reverend Joseph Thaddeus O'Malley was a home rule proponent and Catholic priest, but he also adopted a similar vision of religious unity: "The Protestants, too, I would exhort to banish from their minds all distrust of their Catholic countrymen." "In the great domain of politics, the great mass of the Catholic population of this country are thoroughly exempt from any feeling of anti-Protestant bigotry or exclusiveness. All their most popular idols are every one of them Protestants— Lord Edward Fitzgerald, Wolfe Tone, Robert Emmet..."¹²⁸ Therefore, Wolfe Tone's identity as a Protestant lent itself to this anti-sectarian nationalist effort just as much as Tone's ideology of toleration.¹²⁹

That is not to say that many nationalists did not identify their politics and ideology closely with Catholicism. Indeed, as has been discussed, the majority of nationalists were not atheists, nor did they disregard religion as something other than a foundational nationalist concern. Catholicism remained strongly intertwined with many activists' sense of national and personal identity. Rather, these references to Wolfe Tone that emphasized anti-sectarianism—along with the many others in the mid-to-late-nineteenth century—illustrate a clear and consistent effort by many nationalists to reconcile Ireland's religious divide by emulating Wolfe Tone and the United Irishmen's values of religious toleration. Nationalists

¹²⁸ Rev Thaddeus O'Malley paraphrased in "Home Government," *The Irish Times*, March 2, 1871.

¹²⁹ Another example, published in 1875 by *The Freeman's Journal*: "The Catholic people of Ireland have frequently and nobly demonstrated their liberality and their confidence in the patriotism of their Protestant fellow-citizens... When the Catholics of Ireland were a proscribed and persecuted race their warmest friends and foremost advocates were Protestants. When our country from the darkest thralldom bounded into the clear light of freedom her steps were guided by the hands of Protestant sons... Wolfe Tone was not a Catholic, but his name is honoured amongst the Catholic People." *The Freeman's Journal*, September 21, 1875.

could, on one hand, be devout and identify Catholicism with their nationalism, and on the other, desire Protestant support for the movement.

It becomes clear that, in the late nineteenth-century, nationalists of all stripes echoed Wolfe Tone in declaring that no matter one's religion, the paramount nationalist identity must be that of "Irishman."¹³⁰ These references to Wolfe Tone illuminate a tolerant attitude among nationalists and thus seem to complicate Richard English's depiction of late nineteenth-century Irish nationalism as excluding non-Catholics. Of course, there were people who held a more narrow-minded vision of Ireland's future; the socio-economic realities of both Protestants and Catholics had become so deeply intertwined with religious identities—a fusion that was often difficult to reconcile in the nationalist sphere. However, English's description of Catholic "supremacism" and the religiously "exclusivist quality" of Irish nationalism fails to acknowledge the profound effort made to incorporate all Irishmen, regardless of religion, into the nationalist fold. As Wolfe Tone's history gained greater visibility, this nationalist endeavour remains observable through the early decades of the twentieth century.¹³¹

English's characterization of Nationalism's Catholic quality continues into his description of twentieth-century nationalism.¹³² He also adopts the belief that "the main current of nationalism was driven by Catholicism."¹³³ While it has been established that nationalism took on a particular Catholic cultural character, such an understanding of nationalist motivations risks diminishing the realities of subjugation that informed the desire for autonomy. To flatten the

¹³⁰ Here, I am using the contemporary gendered language. This gendering, however, does not reflect women's participation in the nationalist movement, nor the embrace of women as Irish "people," valuable to the cause.

¹³¹ For more nineteenth-century expressions of this sentiment with references to Wolfe Tone, see "Mr. Mitchel and Tipperary," *The Tralee Chronicle*, March 2, 1875; "The League of North and South: A Chapter of Irish History," *The Freeman's Journal*, October 20, 1885; "The Tipperary Convention," *The Freeman's Journal*, November 19, 1885; in response to the Belfast Riots see "The Belfast Riots," *The Waterford News*, June 18, 1886; *The Freeman's Journal*, September 24, 1887.

¹³² Illustrated in English, *Irish Freedom*, 240, 242, 243.

¹³³ English, *Irish Freedom*, 239.

long-held desire for self-determination as emanating from religiosity trivializes the vast political and economic grievances that nationalists sought to address. The nationalist appropriation of Wolfe Tone in the early twentieth century indicates a much more expansive nationalist desire. Nationalists worked to realize broader economic equality, cultural revival, and ultimately self-determination, *by transcending* religious divides and constructing an Irish identity *beyond* that of religious affiliation.

In a 1909 opinion piece published in *The Irish Independent*, Nicholas C. Philpott responded to accusations that Protestants were being persecuted in the west: “I would like to state that, as a Protestant, born and reared in Co. Clare, I have never seen any of the persecutions mentioned...I have always seen the Protestants of this country...very respectfully treated by the large majority of Catholics.” Whether or not there was an occurrence of Catholic intolerance, this letter indicates a concerted effort to repair the damage that could have been made to the Protestant perception of Catholics. The main source of bigotry, he wrote, “comes from the comparatively small band of Orangemen in the North...Witness the fact that in Dublin over 20 Protestants have been elected, whilst in Belfast never has there been a Catholic Mayor.” Clearly wishing to remedy any offense, he explained that “Protestants in Ireland may rest assured” of their equal treatment under home rule, “no man of the same religion as Robert Emmet, Grattan [or] Wolfe Tone...will be subjected to persecution.” Before quoting Parnell, he concluded that countries such as Canada, New Zealand, and Australia, “where the two religions are both pretty well represented and blended together, we find the highest type of civilization.”¹³⁴

Though one might expect the widespread militarization in 1913—which was essentially a divide between Protestant unionists and Catholic nationalists—to diminish religious tolerance, the persistent references to Wolfe Tone indicate that religious inclusion continued as a nationalist

¹³⁴ Nicholas C. Philpott, “Irish Catholic Toleration,” *The Irish Independent*, October 13, 1911.

ideal. In 1914, the *Irish Weekly Independent* reported on the Irish Volunteers, noting their inclusive approach toward Volunteer membership:

Mr. John Sweetman presided at a meeting at Kells at which 500 men joined the Irish Volunteers. Mr. Sweetman said he believed that all the men in Ireland could meet in friendship on the Volunteer platform without sinking individuality or without anyone ceasing to hold his particular political views. It was necessary for her future existence that Ireland should have her Volunteer army, and he hoped the dream of Wolfe Tone for a united Ireland would be fulfilled.¹³⁵

Similarly, the July 1914 *Irish Freedom* publication quoted Wolfe Tone: “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.”¹³⁶ The paper, which revered Tone so thoroughly, took every opportunity to reiterate his anti-sectarianism: it reminded its readers that the United Irish societies did “much to bring about that unity amongst thoughtful men of all sections which Tone desired.”¹³⁷

While the 1916 Proclamation of the Irish Republic did not explicitly mention Tone, the Rising’s leaders followed in his revolutionary tradition and echoed his religious tolerance: “The Republic guarantees religious and civil liberty, equal rights and equal opportunities to all its citizens, and declares its resolve to pursue the happiness and prosperity of the whole nation and of all its parts, cherishing all the children of the nation equally, and oblivious of the differences carefully fostered by the Alien Government, which have divided a minority from the majority in the past.”¹³⁸ Despite the turmoil that existed in the 1913-1916 moment and beyond, Irish

¹³⁵ *Irish Weekly Independent*, June 6, 1914

¹³⁶ Lucan, “An Outline of Irish History From the Volunteers to Emmet: II-Tone and the United Irishmen,” *Irish Freedom*, July 1914.

¹³⁷ Not only is this paper’s reverence of Tone evidenced by its frequent discussion of him, but also in its characterization of Tone as “the apostle of the new nation” and describing his pursuits as being done “more vitally and more abundantly than any other [man] of his time.” Lucan, “An Outline of Irish History.”

¹³⁸ Tom Clarke, Sean Mac Diarmada, et al. “Poblacht na hEireann. The Provisional Government of the Irish Republic, To the People of Ireland,” Limerick Printing Co., 1916. National Library of Ireland.

nationalists envisioned a far more unified and accommodating future for the Republic than English allows.

In August 1919, *The Irishman* published “Realisation of Tone’s Ideal,” which adopted an optimistic attitude towards Ireland’s future and its capacity to reconcile its religious divisions. After reiterating Wolfe Tone and the United Irishmen’s anti-sectarian ambitions, the writer commented on northern enlistment in the Volunteers, Cumann na mBan, and Sinn Féin, stating that “In three provinces of Ireland today there are banded together in our national organizations men and women of every denomination, working in harmony in the same cause...At last the Ulsterman knows Nationalism is not and never was the monopoly of any religious sect.”¹³⁹

In conclusion, despite the fusion of Irish nationalism with Catholic identity, the persistent and widespread nationalist appropriation of Wolfe Tone as an image of religious unity bolsters the impression that many nationalists harboured a religiously-tolerant vision for Ireland’s future.¹⁴⁰ These references to Tone indicate that nationalists, across factions, were aware of their Catholic character and made explicit overtures to broadcast their wider acceptance. While it is possible that these references, rather than being an aspiration within the nationalist programme, were simply a practical strategy to incentivize nationalist participation, this interpretation would nevertheless suggest that religious differences were secondary to a shared, nationalist cause.

While this attempt to reconcile the religious divide was real and requires recognition, it ultimately did not yield significant results. There is a reason why Ward can confidently state that “When we speak of Irish nationalism we invariably mean the nationalism of the Catholic

¹³⁹ “The Realisation of Tone’s Ideals,” *The Irishman*, August 19, 1919.

¹⁴⁰ For more twentieth-century expressions of this sentiment with references to Wolfe Tone see “Speech of Mr. Denis Johnston,” *The Drogheda Independent*, November 27, 1909; “Wolfe Tone’s Autobiography,” *Evening Herald*, May 10, 1913. In 1912 anniversary celebration held by the Wolfe Tone and United Irishmen Memorial Committee, stated under the title “Our Debt to the Dead,” that “We shall keep this movement free from the entanglements of faction, and, in doing so, we shall invite the aid of every Irishman and woman of patriotic instinct to hurry through to completion an essentially National work.” “Souvenir Programme of Anniversary Celebration,” *Dublin P. Mahon*, November 26, 1912.

community.”¹⁴¹ After all, it is well established that Protestantism was deeply equated with unionist allegiances, and the two would not easily be separated.¹⁴² Undoubtedly, the same can be said of Catholic nationalism—while many of these nationalists insisted that any religion would be welcomed into the nationalist ranks, few (if any) would abandon the nationalist project even if unionists had proposed religious toleration.¹⁴³ Therefore, rather than being the force propelling nationalism, religion was shorthand for expressing power, economic opportunity, culture, and identity. The entanglement of Catholicism with nationalism may not have been mere product of widespread religious devotion, but an extension of the movement’s dedication to repairing historically entrenched disparities.

¹⁴¹ Ward, *The Easter Rising*, 31.

¹⁴² McCaffrey, “Irish Nationalism and Irish Catholicism,” 529.

¹⁴³ It must be noted that this religious tolerance was only extended to other Christian denominations. Anti-semitism was prevalent among many nationalist circles.

Conclusion

Between Young Irelanders' revival of Wolfe Tone in 1843 and the end of the civil war in 1923, Irish history was saturated with the symbolism and inspiration that Tone's life provided. For constitutional nationalists who deployed Wolfe Tone as an evocation of Britain's maltreatment of Ireland, he was a source of national esteem, calling from the grave for increased legislative autonomy. Where these parliamentary agitators omitted or otherwise muted Tone's physical force tactics, the IRB capitalized on them. These revolution-inclined nationalists emphasized Tone's martyrdom and, in doing so, constructed the emotional, self-sacrificial rhetoric foundational to their republican programme: giving one's life for Ireland's independence was the pinnacle of nationalist fervour and made one worthy of the highest praise. Thus, at the height of nineteenth-century parliamentary popularity and through the tumultuous events of the early twentieth century, the mainstream understanding of Tone shifted in step with nationalist debates and developments.

Over this period, the particularities of Wolfe Tone's life—the nuance of his ideologies and the specificity of his historical context—was secondary to whichever interpretation garnered the most support for the given nationalist struggle. This widespread appropriation of Tone's life illustrates history's capacity to inspire community and command allegiance. In other words, a resonance with the past, with its figureheads and struggles, can compellingly inform present-day identities and inspire contemporary action. Still, the fact that Tone's image was appropriated by such disparate movements, and to further such dissenting ideologies, also demonstrates the pliable nature of history. The nationalist co-option of Tone demonstrates that recalling the past with the *principal* aim of galvanizing political adherence or contriving identity can jeopardize historical authenticity.

And while the image of Wolfe Tone was often used to foster community, it was not always successful. During this period when much of Ireland's future was undetermined, nationalists proposed visions for the island's future beyond that of home rule or independence. In Tone, they found a figure of anti-sectarianism and a hope for religious tolerance. The rest of the twentieth century would unravel in a turbulent and religiously-fraught climate, but many within earlier nationalist movements hoped to inaugurate a more harmonious relationship between Irish Catholics and Protestants.

Ultimately, whether it be for cultural, constitutional, or revolutionary movements, Wolfe Tone functioned to inspire pride, political agitation, physical resistance, and unity. Once the romantic revival of Wolfe Tone as a heroic image of Ireland's past was born in the mid-nineteenth century, all subsequent nationalists inherited and used him as a valuable rhetorical tool. Each recipient of Tone's history made meaning of his life through the lens of their day and the imperatives of their nationalist project. Through emphasis and minimization, Wolfe Tone's image was continuously rendered and adjusted, and, in each iteration, reflected contemporary grievances and empowered the nationalist struggle.

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