

Theobald Wolfe Tone (1763-1798)

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If commemoration of the College's great alumni is our function each Trinity Monday, we are – in 1999 - a little late in marking Theobald Wolfe Tone. The bi-centenary of his death was of course last year, a year of exhausting commemorations across many counties of most of the great names of the 1798 rebellion. But today we have the opportunity to compensate a little for the overly modest claims that the College has made on its associations with Tone, both in the distant and the recent past. This is it seems the first Trinity Monday discourse on Tone; it comes long after his political contemporaries Flood and Grattan have received such notice, which has also been accorded to his close friends and fellow radicals Thomas Addis Emmet and Whitley Stokes. And the only graduate in Tone's lifetime whose posthumous fame exceeds that of Tone, Edmund Burke, has been celebrated on no less than three Trinity Mondays this century.

There is however a certain equity in remembering Tone *this* particular Trinity Monday; we lie closest to a pair of anniversaries: the 200th of Tone's death last November, and the 150th of his widow, Matilda, two months ago. She was the daughter of William Witherington, woollen draper of Grafton St.; as a 16-year old she had eloped and married Tone while he was still in College. Her steely determination to preserve the reputation and integrity of her husband through half a century of widowhood, first in France and then in the United States, led to the publication of Tone's autobiography and correspondence in 1826, and the preservation of a unique archive of papers most of which was bequeathed to this college by their great-grand-daughter, Miss Katherine Maxwell, in 1924; further manuscripts were presented by a great-great grand-daughter, Mrs Livingston Dickason, in 1964. The survival of this remarkable collection has made possible the preparation of a definitive edition of Tone's writings, published and unpublished, a project that was launched in 1963 by R B McDowell [who I am delighted is able to be present today], subsequently joined by the late Theo Moody and – much later – by C.J.Woods; the first of the three volumes appeared after many setbacks last year from the OUP,¹ and the imminent appearance of the remaining two will complete the publishing cycle begun by Matilda Tone in 1826.

TCD's modesty towards the memory of Tone is of course not unrelated to the high electric charge that his name and some of his writings have borne in Irish republican discourse, most obviously by the men of 1916; Padraig Pearse's

¹ T.W.Moody, R.B.McDowell, & C.J.Woods, *The writings of Theobald Wolfe Tone 1733-98*, I (Oxford, 1998).

famous characterization of Tone as 'the greatest of all Irishmen',² the figure centre-stage in the pantheon of fallen Irish heroes, was endorsed by other activists who found in his writings sentiments and a political language that seemed to have a compelling and immediate relevance. In the wake of 1916 and during the early years of this state there was a striking number of short editions of his writings and of potted biographies. But his *alma mater* had no part in this. Yet it is worth bearing in mind that the first Irish public figure to venerate the memory of Tone was very much a Trinity product - Thomas Davis - who erected the first memorial stone at the site of Tone's grave in Bodenstown, Co. Kildare in 1844.

The 1826 publication in Washington by Matilda and her surviving son was titled *The Life of Theobald Wolfe Tone* and is a formidably large work of well over a thousand pages; Tone's pen, as his son noted, 'always flowed with light and easy grace'.³ But much the greater part of the *Life* was an abridged edition of his journals written in French exile over the last two and half years; in other words, for all the abundance of autobiographical information and day-to-day musings of Tone in exile, there are many dark corners in his biography - as indeed Tone's modern biographer, Marianne Elliott, has recognized. For the first 28 years of his life - from 1763 to 1790 - our main source of information on Tone is what Tone himself chose to record on paper in his 1796 memoir. However, emerging as a more public figure in 1790, Tone can thereafter be viewed from several angles as both internal and external evidence proliferates. But even during his public career there are tantalizing gaps, notably during his last two years in Ireland between mid-1793 and mid-1795 - when the war and the domestic political clamp-down snuffed out the kind of open opposition politics in which he had already achieved fame and notoriety.

And it is those early, tantalizing, formative years of Tone's life that have an obvious and particular interest for us today. Much has made of Tone's debt to Belfast, a debt he tended to exaggerate in later years. He was, and it needs some underlining, a product of *this* city and no other. His family were the epitome of bourgeois Dublin in the mid-Georgian years: mixed in their occupational backgrounds, craftsmen and shippers, Kildare tenant farmers and city merchants; and mixed in their religion, a Church of Ireland father with Huguenot antecedents, and a Catholic mother who conformed during his childhood. Born on the south side of the city in Bride Street, Tone grew up on the north side - in Stafford Street (west of Jervis Street) where his father and uncle's coach-building business was also located, and he was educated in modest nearby schools in Mabbot and Henry Street. Retrospective characterizations of his childhood emphasize his intelligence, his playfulness, his memory, and hint at an independent streak - which in varying degrees he seems to have shared with his siblings. His father's easy lifestyle seems to have contributed to the decline of the family's fortunes, and the loss of ten of Tone's fifteen siblings in infancy and childhood is indicative of the precarious

² Proinsias Mac Aonghusa, ed. *Quotations from P.H.Pearse* (Dublin, 1979), p.7.

³ W.T.W.Tone, *Life of Theobald Wolfe Tone*, ed. Thomas Bartlett (new unabridged ed., Dublin, 1998), p.1.

world in which he grew up. (By contrast, his future ally Lord Edward Fitzgerald, born within weeks of Tone in aristocratic security, lost only one of his eight siblings before adulthood.) In the Tone household, for all their problems, there was a stubborn commitment to the educational advancement of the sons: Wolfe Tone, as eldest, the first and only member of his family to enter Trinity, had to be almost pushed inside the gates by his father. His schooling and neighbourhood had however given him a circle of needy friends who travelled before or with him to College, notably George Miller, Charles Kendal Bushe, and William Conyngham Plunket (whose father had ministered to Dublin's only New Light Presbyterian congregation in Strand Street). Tone had in other words already socialized in a world of Protestant, Catholic and Dissenter within his own house, street and neighbourhood before entering TCD in 1781, and had developed close teenage friendships with persons who in later life were to achieve great professional celebrity in their own right.

The college at that point was ill at ease with itself; the long and innovative provostship of John Hely Hutchinson was making the college less like the Anglican seminary of mid-century, and socially more heterogeneous, intellectually more lively, and physically more inspiring. Undergraduate numbers had risen by about 50 per cent in the fifteen years prior to Tone's matriculation, and the non-gentry component was rising noticeably. It was of course still a very intimate community, with less than 600 students on the books and many of those making only a rare appearance at public examination time. For an energetic and Dublin-based 17-year old like Tone, there were alluring social opportunities within this academic community – if one had the necessary social skills. And these Tone had – he was charming in manner, witty in conversation, loyal to a fault with those who showed him friendship, and keenly attuned to the unwritten gentlemanly code of honour.

Tone's academic progress was impressive, but patchy. He was lucky enough to have as tutor Dr Mathew Young, one of the most prolific polymaths of eighteenth-century Trinity, but we know little of the relationship. He dropped out in his second year, having been a second in a fatal duel, and he attached himself to the Galway gentry household of Richard - Humanity Dick – Martin as a tutor of a more lowly type; a platonic infatuation with Martin's young wife Eliza gave an entirely different educational experience.

Getting permission to re-enter TCD, Tone became a scholar in 1784, a result of focussed cramming it seems. But what is very clear is that the arena for developing those skills on which Tone's later fame was to rest was not the tutor's chambers, still less the Library – but the Hist.; he was proposed for membership of the Society in 1783 by his old friends Miller and Plunket. For the rest of the decade he maintained an association with it, as did many others long after graduating. The Hist.'s importance rested in the first instance on its self-regulated group-study of modern historical works, divorced from the far more venerable texts learnt as part of the formal arts curriculum in the classics, mathematics and natural philosophy. To what extent a reading of modern historical authors like Hume was important for Tone's formation we can only speculate. But his contemporary and future United Irishman

Thomas Addis Emmet maintained that the task of having to read a Catholic-leaning interpretation of the 1641 rising (by John Curry) 'made a mark on me and much changed my life'. It is often maintained that Tone's knowledge of and interest in Irish history before Molyneux and Swift were slight, but on rare occasions his later writing did reveal some knowledge of the seventeenth century; and in 1793 he was threatening to write a history of Ireland.

The Hist. at its weekly meetings also gave its members the opportunity to develop oratorical skills when they chose to plead motions on matters of modern and ancient controversy. It was in effect a model Irish parliament. Tone certainly made more of a mark in the Hist. than other future United Irish leaders whose undergraduate careers overlapped with his – Arthur O'Connor, John Sheares, or Emmet. It is hard to read between the lines of the surviving journals of the Society to determine just how important the Hist. was for Tone, but it is clear that for city boys, lacking patronage or wealth, the Society was a meritocratic forum: Tone's club-loving personality, his ability as a committee man, and his compositional skills gave him both respect and a widening circle of friends. His affection for, indeed proprietary interest in the Society, is revealed in his famous 1789 speech, given after an absence of almost two years from Dublin; this text is sometimes too easily dismissed as a mock serious chastisement of the next generation of students for allowing the high standards of the Hist. to slip. However the intensity of his nostalgia for 'the halcyon days of peace' before the re-appearance of faction and duelling among members seems quite genuine; he added: 'I do not, dark as our prospects are, yet despair of the republic, if we only set ourselves seriously to the work of reformation'. The Hist. was thus his *res publica*, his little common-wealth, the decline of virtue and honour a betrayal of its citizenry; in all, a revealing conceit. College fraternity and domestic life were not entirely divorced; Matilda remembered fondly in 1849 how as a young bride she 'used to walk constantly [in the College]... and go where I pleased...', a time when her 'Tone was such a pet there'.⁴

His early college years had been by Dublin's standards an era of extraordinary political excitement; the marching, parading and demonstrating of the citizen Volunteers; the 1782 constitutional revolution won by Grattan; the cathartic ending of the American war; and turmoil over the question of Irish parliamentary reform. These intruded into Tone's student life quite directly: as a constituency of the Irish parliament Trinity's academic life was increasingly affected by the political world outside, particularly since the mid-1770s when Provost Hely Hutchinson first sought to control the constituency as if he was the borough owner, to the intense disapproval of many fellows; the political temperature in College rose sharply around election years, notably in 1782 and 1783 when one of the opponents of the Provost, the wealthy Lawrence Parsons, won a seat; Tone was one of his many admirers and junior acquaintances.

⁴ C.J. Woods, 'United Ireland and Young Ireland meet; Charles Hart's account of a meeting with Matilda Tone', in *History Ireland*, vi, 3 (autumn 1998), 12.

Tone became a lifelong friend around this time of Parsons' political associate Peter Burrowes, by then a young lawyer and ten years Tone's senior. Burrowes' particular claim to fame was a remarkable pamphlet which he published anonymously in 1784, in the later stages of the parliamentary reform campaign. By then much of the earlier gentry support for reform had fallen away, and Dublin guild politicians together with a network of radical east Ulster Volunteers were trying to re-ignite the campaign for constituency reform. Burrowes was heavily involved and as part of the campaign published the first unambiguous case for giving back the parliamentary vote to the Catholic majority, rubbishing the moderates' argument that Catholics did not want the franchise: 'They are men – they are Irishmen – they live in a period of liberation – [they] have caught the love of freedom from yourselves – and would disgrace you, themselves and their country, if in this moment of universal expectation they were indifferent or hopeless'.⁵ In the first half of that year some of the city's newspapers, notably Mathew Carey's *Volunteer Journal*, widened their stock-in-trade stream of complaints about the administration into a unprecedented torrent of an anti-English vitriol; new legislative controls over the Irish press, and Mathew Carey's flight to America were the consequences.

The alluring prospect in 1784 of a broad-based reform process, incorporating an inclusive definition of citizenship, soon faded. The betrayal of reform by the moderates, and the shrill re-assertion of the rights and privileges of the established church by clerical partisans, exposed the thinness of 'toleration politics'. However, the fact that a public discussion of such subversive potential took place in 1784 at all, and that it took place so close to the young Tone, has major implications. Those who have argued that Tone slowly and fortuitously backed himself into radical postures in the 1790s have critically under-estimated the importance of his schooling in the politics of radical reform during his College years. That he was diverted to other things between 1784 and 1790 – not least to coping with a precipitate marriage and to the search for a secure profession – is not surprising. But when he returned to the business of politics in 1790-91, old arguments were ready for refurbishment.

Men of Tone's ability and modest circumstances, having invested four or five years in the university, had limited options: ordination, or the law. And whatever Tone's religious views (theology had no interest for him), he would have been repelled by the hierarchical structures of the Church of Ireland; New Light Presbyterianism he respected – although not necessarily all New Lighters themselves. The law was the reluctant option, so he moved to London, on his own, to attend the Inns of Court – where he gave himself a less than rigorous exposure to the law. He spent nearly two unbroken years in London, 1787 and 1788, (a far longer time than he ever spent in Belfast), and began his writing career there, as well as strengthening a fascination with theatre. (*Belmont Castle, the roman a clef* which he co-authored with Irish friends, dates

⁵ [Peter Burrowes], *Plain arguments in defence of the people's absolute dominion over the constitution in which the question of the Roman Catholic franchise is considered* (Dublin, 1784), p.44.

from this time).⁶ He was not repelled by his experience of London; certainly it was not the cause of his later hostility to things English.

One footnote to his London years has fascinated and perplexed his biographers: this was his advocacy, then and on return to Dublin, of a scheme for the British government to mount a military conquest of the Sandwich islands – modern Hawaii – and to establish a military colony along ancient Roman lines in order to weaken Spanish commerce in the Pacific; his memoranda to Pitt and to other members of the British government were well researched and lucidly argued, and had anyone in power pursued his ideas we can assume that he would have enthusiastically cooperated. The concept was not naive, but his understanding of the processes of political lobbying and decision-making were. He also entertained the idea of trying his fortune with the East India Company at this time, of accompanying his seasoned brother William back east. That he could have disappeared off the map and out of history is perhaps disconcerting, but the essential point is that these plans indicate the shapelessness of his ambition, and the lack of a strong sense of family responsibility. It was many years before he had a sure sense of direction, but his sense of family loyalty seems to have significantly deepened on his return to Ireland.

Back home, moving between the city and north Kildare, he had limited success as a hungry barrister on the Leinster circuit; time was not to tell whether he had the potential to emulate his friends Plunket, Bushe and Burrowes in carving out a lucrative career at the bar. Bearing oppressive financial and domestic worries and a poor fee income, Tone sought to use his flair for writing and in 1790-91 he began, albeit somewhat uncertainly, as a party pamphleteer, initially for the parliamentary Whigs. It was already apparent that he could write well and under pressure, as contributions to two Dublin monthly magazines reveal. His style or rather styles evolved markedly through the decade. However the two most important essays which he wrote for immediate publication were composed at the beginning of the decade - in 1790 and 1791 – *Spanish war!*, and his *Argument on behalf of the Catholics of Ireland*. The first was relatively unsuccessful, indeed professionally damaging; the second made his reputation, not as a lawyer but as the supreme wordsmith in radical circles, north and south.

The interest of *Spanish war!* is its unusually strong statement of Ireland's right to develop an autonomous foreign policy without sundering the connection with the British crown; talk of an Irish navy, an Irish flag and Ireland's subaltern status was not new, but the imagery and plainness of the argument were. Tone was stretching to its limits the civic humanist political tradition that had previously shaped his thinking. The success of the *Argument on behalf of the Catholics* was different, and related to the rapid growth of pro-French sentiment in the old centres of reform agitation, east Ulster and the neighbourhood of Dublin; the torrent of French revolutionary news, verbal images, and new catch-phrases reaching the literate Irish public by 1791 was

⁶ It was first published in Dublin in 1790; the first modern edition appeared last year.

profoundly affecting the chemistry of public opinion. Tone's response to the early stages of the Revolution was not recorded then. But in the course of 1791 his line of argument took a new direction. One particular reason was a new friendship struck up in the summer of 1790 with Thomas Russell: like Tone, Russell was from a non-gentry Church of Ireland background with Catholic forbears in the female line, energetic, foot-loose and viscerally critical of the political establishment around him. He was also an enthusiast for many of the ideas that excited Tone, and they developed an intense comradeship that influenced each other's thinking over the next five years. Russell's political views were no more immutable or consistent than Tone's, but it is clear that on several occasions it was Russell's thinking that led Tone to conclusions, or at least to arguments, that were new. Russell lacked Tone's university experience, the self-confidence and literary skills it had given him. Nor did he have the tactical political intuition that was soon to mark Tone out. But Russell's philosophic interests were broader than those of Tone, and he had a quite unusual and unpatronizing empathy with the poor and those beyond the palisade of respectability. Russell lacked Tone's prickly sense of honour, Tone Russell's mood swings, undisciplined lifestyle and military experience. But the most tangible early result of the friendship was that Russell introduced Tone to the radical world of Belfast

An outline of the *Argument on behalf of the Catholics* had been sketched out, we now know, by Russell several months before its composition in July 1791. Yet the essay's intellectual elegance and passionate force were emphatically Tone's literary achievement. Its invitation to Presbyterian Ulster to recognize that the only hope for winning political reform in Ireland was through a strategic alliance of the creeds against the forces of reaction was not an entirely original formulation. However its compelling argument was that events in France had destroyed for all time the old Protestant belief that Catholics could have no genuine yearnings for liberty, certainly no capacity to achieve and defend it. In its plain unvarnished language, its concreteness of argument, and its cleverly constructed organization, it bears comparison with the tear-away international success of the previous season, Paine's *Rights of Man*. Ironically there may be more echoes of Burke than Paine in Tone's *Argument*, but with an eventual print-run of 16,000. Tone's pamphlet was only surpassed in terms of circulation by the Irish editions of *The rights of man*.

The immediate significance of the *Argument* was of course in breaking down resistance in Belfast to the full adoption of Catholic political emancipation as an integral goal of the first Belfast Society of United Irishmen when this group was established in October 1791. Tone, with Russell's help, played a critical role in drafting the society's initial resolutions, and was intensely proud of that. On home ground several weeks later in the more complex cocktail of Dublin's radical politics, Tone and Russell played a lesser role in the launch of the southern United Irishmen; although a leading member of the Dublin Society from the beginning Tone rarely played a decisive role in its large and noisy meetings, and this despite the early membership of many of his friends, including Burrowes, Stokes and Emmet.

Tone's most controversial text dates from the eve of these developments – the private letter to Russell in which he distinguished between his public sentiments, as drafted for the Belfast radicals in the summer of 1791, and his own private views. For in that letter Tone had for the first time expressed a clear-cut preference for the breaking of the Anglo-Irish connection. Some modern biographers have been perhaps a little keen to discount what Tone, most unwisely as it turned out, chose to put down in writing then – it would seem as a kind of aide-memoire for Russell. It is worth reminding ourselves of Tone's private words:

my unalterable opinion is that the bane of Irish prosperity is the influence of England. I believe that influence will ever be exerted while the connexion between the two countries continues. Nevertheless, as I know that opinion is, for the moment, too hardy, tho' a very little time may establish it universally, I have not made it a part of the resolutions. I have only proposed to set up a reformed parliament... I have not said one word that looks like a wish for separation, tho' I give it to you and your friends as my most decided opinion that such an event would be a regeneration for this country.⁷

The letter quickly became known to government – although possibly only to his wife's kinsman, the Lord Chancellor, John Fitzgibbon. But when it was publicized - to Tone's anger and embarrassment - two years later, he sought to put an innocent gloss on it:

I can well conceive such a connection between two countries as would be highly beneficial to both; so much, perhaps, as to double the resources and power which either would have if separate... What is the evil of this country? British influence. What is the remedy? A reform in parliament. How is that attainable? By a union of all the people.⁸

Yet the implications of what Tone had been asserting in 1791 was at that point quite new: that political reform within the current structures was either going to fail or to be, at best, imperfect; Anglo-Irish relations could never be placed on an equitable footing, in a word the connection was *irreformable*.

Did anything occur between 1791 and 1793 that might have led Tone to change his mind about ultimate desirability of separation? The one great development in his career at that stage was his year-long employment as assistant secretary to the Catholic Committee; this body of Dublin-based gentry, merchants and professionals had played a discreet but crucial role in the dismantling of much of the penal laws over the previous decade and a half. The conflict within parliament and government in 1791-2 over the efficacy of granting political relief to Catholics had forced the Catholic Committee onto a perilous confrontation with government and the dominant interests in the Irish parliament. The decision by the machiavellian John Keogh, the former silk mercer from Dame Street, to hire a Protestant barrister both as a political writer and campaign manager was a measure of the shrewd judgement of the Catholic leaders in recognizing the man for the moment. Tone threw all his energy and political imagination into the Committee's plans, and worked well with the older and wiler Keogh. The successful holding of the convention in December 1792 in the Tailor's guild hall, a long stone-throw from Dublin

⁷ Moody, McDowell, & Woods, *Tone*, p. 104.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 454, 456.

Castle, was a triumph in which Tone rightly shared; he was a discreet behind-the-curtain manager, and his fastidious attention to detail and sharp judgement of character helped carry the event. The Catholic delegation, with Tone in tow, went to London, was received by the king, and negotiated with Henry Dundas; the visit led directly to the forcing of the 1793 Catholic relief act down the throats of a reluctant Irish administration and an unwilling Irish parliament. 1793 of course re-opened the parliamentary franchise to Catholics, restored the right to bear firearms and *inter alia* reopened this college to Catholic students. In the months that followed – when the Lord Chancellor chose to publish Tone's former thoughts on separation – the Catholic Committee secretary could reasonably plead that the intervening two years had indeed shown 'one instance where... [British influence] has been beneficially applied to Ireland' with London directing Dublin Castle quite nakedly.

Yet even by the time Tone wrote these words of exculpation, the shallowness of the Catholic victory of 1793 was becoming apparent: without the backing of a sympathetic Irish government, access to commanding heights of power and patronage were still fenced off. But Tone's opportunities to continue the campaign for Catholic relief were severely circumscribed by the war and by a politicized legal system that was beginning to be used to crack down on opposition political activity. Nevertheless by the end of 1793 there was the prospect on the horizon of a more benign administration coming to Dublin Castle, the consequence of realignments and wartime coalition in Westminster. Such an outcome teased the likes of Tone, for there was in theory a chance that he would be able to exercise some legitimate political influence if a reforming regime with a Catholic agenda took over in Dublin Castle. Tone had little time for most of the Whig politicians who were now licking their lips, but he became close enough to Francis Rawdon, future earl of Moira, to secure him as god-parent for his third son, born in the summer of 1793. However, long before a Whig viceroy came to the Castle there came the unexpected visit from London of the rev. William Jackson, acting as a French agent; Tone was duly introduced to him by his United friends and called upon to put pen to paper.

The short memorandum drawn up by Tone nearly cost him his life there and then. Luckily, although government were well aware of Jackson's mission, no copy of Tone's appraisal was found in his own hand-writing. In his statement to Jackson Tone delivered a crude assessment of his co-religionists as parasites,

all aristocrats, adverse to any change and decidedly enemies to the French Revolution... The Government of Ireland is to be looked upon as a government of force; the moment a superior force appears, it would tumble at once, as being neither founded in the interests nor in the affections of the people.⁹

The dissenters were 'the most enlightened', 'devoted to liberty', the Catholics too oppressed to have a distinct political voice. It was in fact a curious caricature of Irish society, revealing both the propagandist in Tone, and his chasmic ignorance of the *menu peuple* of Protestant Ulster. Neither here nor at

⁹ Ibid., p. 507.

any point in his writings did his analysis take account of the depth of popular religious feeling or of its potency in shaping collective fear and anger. His Dublin world, combined with his natural intimacy with north Kildare, did not equip him to understand the dynamics of south Ulster, north Wexford, or west Cork.

Tone's prospects in Ireland were fatally cut by this compromising statement to Jackson, even though he negotiated a remarkably generous deal thanks to the mediation of his College friend, Marcus Beresford - in effect parole until the unfortunate William Jackson was tried, and then permanent exile. During this hiatus, a Whig viceroy in the person of Earl Fitzwilliam made his comet-like appearance in Dublin Castle, and was recalled after an unprecedentedly short stay; the ensuing bitterness, particularly among the still active members of the Catholic Committee, seemed only to confirm Tone's 1791 formulation: the irreformability of Ireland within its present structures. His penmanship was again briefly employed by a now more profoundly disaffected Catholic leadership.

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As every Irish school child knows - or at least used to know - Tone left Dublin in May 1795, mandated by his United Irish colleagues in Dublin and Belfast, to seek the aid of France in the overthrow of the Irish government and the establishment of an independent Irish republic, an unambiguously separatist imperative; America as a stepping stone to France, and a willing French government in due course answering the call and sending the Bantry Bay expedition at the end of the following year. Modern research, notably by Marianne Elliott, has given us a far more nuanced picture about this extraordinary period in Tone's life¹⁰ - but several intriguing questions remain. There is the nature of Tone's mandate: was he delegated by his old employers, the Catholic Committee, to go to France in 1795, or did he, as he claimed, merely seek their endorsement after he had chosen a particular course of action as he prepared for exile? In his blue-print for Ireland after the revolution which he sketched out for General Hoche a year later, Tone saw the Catholic Committee as forming at least the provisional government of the country: was this recommendation a matter of obligation or of choice on Tone's part?

When he arrived in Pennsylvania, the strength of his commitment to pursue a political mission remains unclear. Having brought cash and his library of 600 books with him from Ireland, he chose after a few months to buy a farm at Princeton - its attractions being 'a college and some good society':¹¹ not the actions of a single-minded conspirator. What if instead of despising America he had been seduced by its charms - as indeed so many United Irish emigres were soon to be. Perhaps the role of Matilda in re-assuring him that his duty

¹⁰ Marianne Elliott, *Wolfe Tone: Prophet of Irish independence* (New Haven and London, 1989), parts. vii-viii.

¹¹ Elliott, *Tone*, p. 272.

lay in re-crossing the Atlantic may have been decisive. We do know that thanks (once again) to the quality of his advocacy on paper – in his written briefs to the French minister in Philadelphia - he was strongly encouraged by the diplomat to travel to France, which he did at the first day of 1796. The fact that on arrival in Paris Tone managed to get to the top of the political pyramid and see Carnot, the Directory's War Minister, within a mere ten days reflected both on Tone's impressive diplomatic skills and on good fortune in his timing. His memoranda written for the French government shortly after that meeting reiterated the entirely negative judgement on his own background – seeing the Anglican Ireland as 'a colony of strangers'¹² – and dwelt on the universally positive popular attitudes towards the prospect of French help.

In one sense, Tone over the next two years passes beyond our horizon – his successful assumption into French military service, the development of a series of warm friendships within the French military as the first Irish expedition is prepared, the nemesis of Bantry Bay, made easier by the arrival of his family from America, the bitter loss of political support in Paris for a second expedition, a loss greatly compounded with the sudden death of his hero, Lazare Hoche. Then the ebbing tide of opportunity was temporarily reversed in mid-1798 with the news – finally – of rebellion in Ireland, the botched assemblage of three small expeditions, and his choice to travel on the Bompard mission, despite displaying a soft-spoken sense of its impossible task.

But in another sense, it is at this time when Tone is away from all his old friends and away from the Irish world that he was so much a product of, that he wrote his autobiography and kept his running journal with almost obsessive detail from February 1796 until June 1798. These are documents not just of enormous intrinsic historical interest – not least for illuminating France under the Directory – but they are, as Tom Bartlett has recently said, important landmarks in the literature of self-expression.¹³ Their concern with feelings, dreams, nostalgia and self-doubt have a startling immediacy when we encounter them first, and make Tone the eighteenth-century Irishman that we can know best – better even than Swift or Burke. Whether in the exhilaration of summer '96 or the pathos of '98 as waves of dark news fill the final months of the journal, the emotion of his writing is extraordinarily infectious for the twentieth-century reader.

Tone's second expedition from Brest - in September '98 – was, unlike that of '96, under-manned, poorly led and ill-fated from the start. And its departure this time was no secret - thanks to the good intelligence reports of TCD graduate Samuel Turner, based in Hamburg. Intercepted off north Donegal, the flag-ship *Hoche* with Tone on board put up a day-long fight before some 600 of its original complement of 1,000 men were captured and brought on a Royal Navy vessel into Lough Swilly. Recognized by another TCD acquaintance despite his French uniform, Tone brought to Dublin in chains. Burrowes and

¹² Bartlett, *Life of Tone*, p. 604.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. xlvi.

other TCD educated men of the bar sought to challenge the legality of his court martial, but in vain.

Even in a city convulsed by the rebellion and its aftermath, the arrival, brief detention and suicide of one of their own seems to have taken many off-guard. His (well-prepared) speech from the dock was published almost immediately by at least two city printers, and it appeared for all to read in the December issue of the *Dublin Magazine*. One paragraph was cut out however. It began:

I have laboured to abolish the infernal spirit of religious persecution by uniting the Catholics and the Dissenters; to the former I owe more than can ever be repaid; the services I was so fortunate to render them, they rewarded munificently but they did more; when the public cry was raised against me, when the friends of my youth swarmed off and left me alone, the Catholics did not desert me...¹⁴

But if this was true in life, it was to be less true in death: the big players in Catholic politics then and long thereafter disassociated themselves from Tone and from his memory, and it was some of those friends from College and his youth – notably Burrowes, Emmet, and Russell – who sought to help his family. So perhaps a truer epitaph – at least for today – might be Tone's directive to Matilda about the rearing of the family, given in one of his last letters to her in June 1798:

make the boys mind their books... if ever I come to be any thing it will be all along [because] of leaning.¹⁵

¹⁴ Elliott, *Tone*, p. 394.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 374.