

1798: A Bicentenary Perspective

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The 1990s in Ireland witnessed intense popular and academic interest in the events of two centuries before, culminating with the bicentennial commemorations of the United Irish Rebellion of 1798. Television and radio programmes were produced, battles recreated complete with pikemen, centres opened to interpret the Rebellion, and many local conferences and summer schools held, a programme of commemoration and celebration sponsored by the Irish government and many local councils north and south. This collection is the product of the five-day conference held in Belfast and Dublin that was the centrepiece of the academic programme for 1998. It contains 32 of the 36 papers given at that conference plus an additional one, linked by a series of introductory essays. The papers are grouped into eight sections dealing with the eighteenth-century intellectual background, the rebellion in the south, Ulster, protestant and loyalist responses to 1798, government action, the memory of 1798, the international context, and Irish politics in America and Australia. The breadth of material covered and the addition of a 65-page bibliography of material published on the 1790s between 1900-2002 mean that the editors believe the collection is 'definitive and self-critical', as well as providing a 'baseline for the next generation of research' (p. ix) Given the scope of the volume, any review can only examine a small number of the essays in detail while commenting on what the future direction of the historiography might be.

Breandán Ó Buachalla's examination of the political mindset of the popular classes as revealed through Gaelic poetry is one of the most welcome contributions. He is the leading scholar of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Gaelic poetry but his masterwork, *Aisling Ghéar*, is available only in Irish and ends in

1788 with the death of the Stuart Pretender, just before the French Revolution radically altered the nature of any potential French invasion of Ireland. This essay covers the 1790s and translates cited poetry into English. He argues for the continued vitality of Jacobite rhetoric in expressing the views and discontents of the Gaelic masses in the second half of the eighteenth century, and its importance for determining how the elite radical message of the 1790s was reinterpreted further down the social scale. As Ó Buachalla puts it, Jacobite rhetoric was ‘the primary medium through which large sections of the community were made politically conscious’ and it adapted to changing circumstances, ‘both locally and nationally’. (p. 77) During the eighteenth century it functioned as ‘a corrosive radical idiom which undermined the legitimacy of the *status quo* and which foretold its eventual demise’ via foreign aid for the Gael. (p. 78) Thus the United Irish-French alliance fit perfectly into pre-existing patterns of thought.

Ó Buachalla demonstrates the blend of modern revolutionary ideas and traditional grievances and prejudices by citing a poem that rejoiced in the end of kingly slavery in France and throughout Europe but went on to predict that the native Irish would ‘trounce the offspring of Luther’. (cited on p. 83) He also finds this ‘powerful binary distinction between two mutually exclusive groups in Ireland’ in the work of Mícheál Óg Ó Longáin, a United Irish organiser in Cork and Gaelic poet. (p. 87) However, at the same time Ó Longáin’s poems called for confessional unity to free Ireland – ‘if he’s a Protestant or a Quaker, do not envy or hate him but let ye all rise up together as they smite the enemy’. (cited on p. 90) Thus Ó Buachalla illustrates nicely the sometimes contradictory nature of United Irish propaganda which tried to gain support by mobilising traditional grievances, but which could easily foster sectarianism.

This contribution is an important step forward in the historiography of the 1790s, shedding much-needed light on Gaelic sources. His argument that Gaelic poetry provides an insight into the social and economic discontents is unquestionable but his belief that Jacobitism ‘provided a counter-hegemonic discourse, it expressed a focused collective consciousness, it furnished a sustaining cultural poetics for a dominated people’ (p. 77) will be less readily accepted for the late eighteenth century. It could be that Jacobite rhetoric offered the lower orders a language of voicing discontent produced by the dislocating effects of economic and social change that their political vocabulary had not yet adjusted to, a process which was only completed in the 1790s and early nineteenth century. Regardless, Breandán Ó Buachalla’s essay will further stimulate the increasing use of Gaelic sources by historians of eighteenth-century Ireland.

One of the great mysteries about 1798 is the failure of certain areas to rise. Discussion of this topic has concentrated on Ulster, but the question applies equally to Munster, and is the subject of David Dickson’s contribution. Munstermen were prominent in the United Irish leadership and information flowed into Dublin Castle about United activity there in the years before the Rebellion, yet no significant Munster turn-out occurred. Dickson situates his discussion of radical fortunes throughout the 1790s within the changing confessional, social, economic and political circumstances of the period, giving his work added depth and authority. His analysis of the contribution of economic difficulties to violence and their relative importance in the spread of disaffection in autumn/winter 1797 in particular is exemplary, and demonstrates how greatly our understanding of the period would be enhanced by more detailed exploration of the material conditions in which the political and sometimes sectarian struggle was played out. (pp. 160-2) The mix of anti-sectarian, French-inspired republicanism with traditional fears and hostilities visible throughout Ireland is found in Munster. The conclusion drawn by Dickson is that the United organisation was widespread, its propaganda successfully penetrating beyond the Anglophone towns, but that its effectiveness, as elsewhere, was shattered by strong government and military action before the outbreak of rebellion.

The collection contains a large number of excellent local studies, detailing the development of the United Irishmen in Dublin and events in north and south Leinster, the French invasion of Connacht, and various parts of Ulster – all of which help form a clearer picture of what happened in 1798, and the importance of local circumstances in determining the regional forms of a national, even international, struggle.

Breandán Mac Suibhne’s examination of north-west and south-west Ulster in the last quarter of the eighteenth century is one of the most innovative contributions, both in methodology and conclusions. He thoroughly examines the public sphere in the area from the 1770s to demonstrate that the growth of the

United Irishmen locally was rooted in 'a protracted and regionally-specific process of politicisation in which the critical period was the late 1770s and early 1780s' which meant that the organisation there 'grew out of existing beliefs, structures and networks and was not externally imposed.' This argument challenges the 'dominant analysis' that the strength of the United movement in rural areas was dictated by their distance from urban centres of radical organisation and propaganda.(p. 246)

Mac Suibhne contrasts the economic, linguistic and sectarian differences between north-west and south-west Ulster and shows how they produced contrasting political cultures in both areas. In the north-west, centred on Derry city, the exclusion of the Presbyterian and the increasingly Anglicised and wealthy Catholic bourgeoisie, added to the presence of the associational, physical and print aspects of the public sphere, allowed for the development of a non-confessional patriotism which challenged the status quo. This identity survived the collapse of the national reform movement in the early 1780s, expressing itself in schemes for economic improvement, before radicalism was reinvigorated by the commemoration of the centenary of the Siege of Derry (attended by the local Catholic priest) and further boosted by the impact of the French Revolution, signified by the Derry cheap edition of *The Rights of Man*: the first produced in the north and possibly the only Irish edition to include interpolations on how the arguments applied to Ireland. Local radicals continued to rely primarily on their own printed propaganda rather than on imported material. Although radicalism was present, a United Irish organisation emerged only in 1796. Reflecting the pattern of United Irish organisation in east Ulster, revolutionaries were strongest where Volunteering had been at its most radical. Loyalism quickly asserted itself, producing counter-propaganda and attacking radicals opposed to the war when it broke out.

In the south-west, on the other hand, Mac Suibhne finds that 'a lower degree of social and cultural differentiation within both denominational blocs' ensured that political culture was more traditional, this 'general ideological paralysis' being demonstrated by the strength of Jacobitism.(p. 252) Lower economic development meant that the region's first newspaper was the *Enniskillen Chronicle* of 1808, and this adversely affected the development of the new politics. It was 1797 before the United movement spread to south-west Ulster. Again, prompt government action precipitated the decline of the United movement in west Ulster before the actual rising, and as a result there was no major turn-out. But perhaps the most historiographically important part of this paper comes in the final sentence, where Mac Suibhne points out that future examination will need to focus more on government interference in the public sphere through a concerted campaign against press freedom from the mid-1780s. Looked at from this standpoint, the forces of reaction were violating the constitution and repressing the expression of public opinion long before the Militia, Convention and Gunpowder Acts of 1793, just as liberals and radicals claimed.

Ian McBride's essay on Ulster Presbyterian remembrance and forgetting of 1798 is another contribution addressing concerns prominent in other countries, and is part of a growing area of Irish history. McBride points out that the 'political rhetoric, public ritual and iconography of Ulster Unionism has descended from the ... counter-revolutionary tradition of the 1790s embodied in the Orange Order'.(p. 479) Or, in other words, a collective denial of the separatist, anti-sectarian, democratic republicanism of 1790s Presbyterian radicalism. While examining how this came about through the growth of evangelism and the deliberate creation of a unionist story of the Rebellion, McBride, by carefully reading the evidence, describes how the United movement left a deeper impression than is commonly supposed, through the families of those who fought and died, spawning a rich oral tradition, and an Ulster Liberalism that lasted at least until the first Home Rule crisis of 1886, and found echoes in twentieth-century radicals like the poet John Hewitt. His subtle analysis demonstrates the potential contribution studying memory can make to our understanding of the politics of modern Ireland.

David W. Miller, following Clifford Geertz, describes the eighteenth-century Irish polity as a theatre state, and argues that the forms of political action can only be understood within the limits set by such a state. He claims that in east Ulster, the main actors were not agents of the government, but collective bodies practising 'politically salient rituals' – secret societies such as the Oakboys, the Volunteers, Masonic lodges, and the covenant-based Presbyterian sects. Their popularity, he believes, demonstrates the 'increasingly evident dysfunctions' that brought about the collapse of the Irish state in the 1790s.(p. 197) Taking a longer view, he

rejects the widely-held belief that the United Irishmen founded modern Irish nationalism – a phenomenon which he says arose in response to the failings of a state not yet formed – and instead insists they should be viewed as participants in the struggle as they understood it, rather than the harbingers of a future unknown to them.

Miller divides political ritual into four types – patriotic, illuminist, communitarian, and theocratic – and then analyses the position of each in relation to whether it was public or secret, and whether it reinforced or undermined the existing social and political structure. He goes on to examine how the United Irishmen adapted and mixed these differing types at various times. He argues that it is possible the United Irishmen were seeking to unite their patriotic/illuminist model with the communitarian practices of Defenderism, and then describes how loyalists adopted similar tactics with the Orange lodges. The clash of arms between the two in 1798 dramatised the failure of the existing political system, provoking Britain to seek a new framework, the Union. This drove a wedge between Presbyterians and Catholics, by granting Presbyterians the beginnings of the political reform that had been at the heart of their demands, while withholding the Emancipation so important to Catholic activists. Miller's model and conclusions will be contested, but represent an imaginative attempt to place Ulster, and by implication, Irish political practices in a fresh light.

Brendan Simms' provocative contribution asks whether the bases of United Irish support mean it is better viewed as equivalent to European revolution or counter-revolution, before examining what a French-backed Irish Republic might have been like. Accepting that Louis Cullen, Jim Smyth and Kevin Whelan have proved the political nature of the rebellion in Wexford, Simms puts forward the controversial argument that 'the politicisation of Wexford – indeed of much of the whole island – was more *counter*-revolutionary than revolutionary in character', in that the aim of the Catholic 'underground gentry' was to overturn the religious and land settlements of the seventeenth century. Therefore, he continues, the difference between the Vendean and Wexford Catholic leaderships was 'chronological rather than fundamental' – both were bent on reclaiming what they had been dispossessed of, and he cites sectarian outrages in Wexford and various Defender oaths as proof.(p. 587) At the same time, he argues that the United Irish leadership were 'purer' bourgeois revolutionaries than their Continental counterparts, coming more from the middle ranks of society and committed to the secularist programme central to the French Revolution. Thus the United Irishmen were both revolutionaries and counter-revolutionaries in Simms' view. In an attack on the dominant theme of recent 1790s historiography, he denies that events in Ireland formed part of a broader international revolutionary struggle and states 'What the repoliticization of 1798 gains in "inclusiveness", it risks losing in explanatory power'.(p. 589)

According to Simms, Ireland in the 1790s was a sideshow in the century-long Anglo-French struggle for hegemony. This struggle produced many strange bedfellows throughout Europe, with Republican France battling Catholic peasants at home while supporting them in Ireland, just as Britain played the Orange card in Ireland while supporting Catholic counter-revolution on the continent. From here, he moves on to 'informed speculation' about what a French-backed United Irish Republic might have been like. He concludes that a massacre of Protestants was likely, followed by the creation of a 'murderous bourgeois secular satellite state, subservient to the needs of French foreign policy', on the basis of events in Wexford and the attitude and behaviour of French troops in other European countries.(p. 592) The bourgeois leadership would have been dependent on French arms to suppress sectarian violence and forestall the development of an Irish sans-culottism. In his view, the result would have been a 'protracted conflict' with the Catholic majority, as the faithful fell in behind a counter-revolutionary clergy threatened by secularism.(p. 593) Just as many French revolutionaries of 1789 became counter-revolutionary, so too would have been the case in Ireland. Simms claims the hostility of the majority of the old Catholic gentry and Church hierarchy was precisely because they knew what was happening in Europe, and that by remaining loyal they sought to avoid a new and ferocious attack on their way of life.

All this is cogently argued and plausible. However, Simms fails to examine in significant depth other possible outcomes. Perhaps the most important is the question of whether Pitt's government could have survived the loss of Ireland, and whether any British government would have sued for peace faced with a very real possibility of invasion. The United Irish movement clearly had much more popular support than its

European equivalents, and may have proven less easy for the French to dominate once in power. It is also legitimate to question whether the comparison with French-occupied Europe is comparing like with like. As for the social question, there is good reason for thinking that United leaders played down their radicalism after the Rebellion, while others were avowed social radicals. Wolfe Tone's 'men of no property' may have referred to wealthy non-landowners, as many argue, but equally, in a world where the French Constituent Assembly, and then the Constitution of 1795 had defined property in terms of taxes paid, it seems just as plausible that Tone meant the lower orders.

Kevin Whelan's eight introductions make his the largest single voice, comprising 72 of the 657 pages of text. Whelan is one of the key figures in the reinterpretation of the 1790s over the last fifteen years or so who has stressed popular politicisation, and is perhaps the scholar most identified with the commemorations in the public mind, partly because of his role as advisor to the Irish Government for the commemorations and his personal attendance at scores of events throughout the country, and his introductions form 'an extended personal review as to where [17]98 studies stand after the bicentennial dust has settled'. (p. ix) They are knowledgeable, wide-ranging, entertaining and sometimes pugnacious. However, they might have benefited from the citation of evidence for their more controversial claims, such as the idea that Daniel O'Connell, a yeoman in 1798 who denounced United Irish ideology and violence during his political career in the nineteenth century, was himself a United Irishman who succeeded in covering his revolutionary tracks. (p. 606) The decision to include them was a bold move, and works well, adding a level of cohesion while providing an accessible extended discussion of the historiography, past, present and where it might go in future. They make the volume much easier to handle and more useful for both students and the more casual reader.

Unavoidably this review has had to miss out many important essays, including (but not only) Tom Bartlett's detailing of government's intelligence failures as well as successes; Marianne Elliott's reassertion of the reality and importance of sectarianism, and the possibility of a favourable reception for a French invasion as late as 1811; Jim Livesey on the changing nature of eighteenth-century republicanism, Luke Gibbons on United Irish attitudes to Gaelic culture within an Enlightenment context, and Geraldine Sheridan on the coverage of French Enlightenment thought in Irish magazines, which all remind us that Ireland must be viewed in a wider context, as do Maurice J Bric, and David Wilson, who separately demonstrate the place of Irish people in defining American radical and conservative political culture; Allan Blackstock, James Kelly and James Wilson on loyalism help address a long-standing imbalance in the literature, as does Dáire Keogh's examination of the neglect of women in the 1790s. This gives an indication of the quality of the collection, which is an achievement of which the publishers can be proud.

Inevitably, some essays are better than others, and the delay in publication means that some of the arguments have appeared elsewhere. The aim of being definitive seems impossible to meet, particularly given the absence of some of the papers delivered in 1998 and of major 1798 scholars like Louis Cullen, Nancy Curtin, Jim Smyth and A T Q Stewart, as well as some of the critics of the overall tone of the 1798 commemorations, like Tom Dunne, although one cannot hold the editors responsible for this. The aim of providing a baseline for future research has been magnificently accomplished, both via the bibliography (inevitably imperfect) and C J Woods' analysis and synopsis of R R Madden's life and work.

So whither 1798 studies? Particularly necessary is research on conservatism, which has not received anything like its due (although Allan Blackstock's forthcoming work on popular loyalism will make a major contribution), and a modern general narrative is lacking. The economic background to the entire 1790s remains imperfectly understood at best, but given the collapse of economic history in general this vital area is likely to remain shrouded. The boom in 1798 studies was stimulated to a great degree by the bicentenary, but the next 20 years see the centenary of the controversial events that created modern Ireland, and it is likely many scholars will be drawn instead in this direction. Regardless, the quality of this collection means that it is unlikely to be replaced before the commemorations of 2048.

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