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Theobald Wolfe Tone as a Politician and Diplomat

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement
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by

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I. Introduction

Mythologizing historical figures is tempting. Creating martyrs and heroes from old battles lost and won can make those stories easier to understand and certainly easier to use in support of modern causes. Despite the convenience, ignoring the depths of historical characters is a harmful practice. Past events and people were just as complex as modern ones, and failing to recognize this prevents understanding of both the events themselves and their effects on the world of today.

The Irish revolutionary Theobald Wolfe Tone has often been subject to such misinterpretations. Tone, called the “father of Irish republicanism,” has been a focus of both scholarly and cultural attention.¹ His large body of personal and public writings makes his life and his role in the 1798 Irish rebellion against English rule easy to study, but understanding Tone’s real character and his place in the political context of the time is a more complex endeavor.

Tone was born in Dublin in 1763 to a middle-class family. Though he campaigned for much of his life for the rights of the Catholics of Ireland, he himself was raised in the established Anglican Church.² As a founding member of the Society of United Irishmen and later secretary to the Catholic Committee, Tone was concerned in the early 1790s with advocating for religious unity and legal reforms to the parliamentary system, such as expanding suffrage, redrawing electoral districts, and abolishing property qualifications for members of Parliament.³ While some of his fellow United Irishmen, mostly Presbyterian Dissenters, were more wary, Tone was particularly invested in emancipation for Catholics, who had very few political rights in Ireland

¹ Hubert Butler, “Wolfe Tone and the Common Name of Irishman” (Mullingar: Lilliput Press, 1985), 9.

² Marianne Elliott, *Wolfe Tone*, 2nd ed. (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2012), 9-11.

³ Marianne Elliott, *Partners in Revolution: The United Irishmen and France* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), 26.

despite being by far the majority religious group.⁴ Initial attempts at parliamentary reform were unsuccessful, and the United Irishmen soon found themselves turning to more radical methods and considering outright separation from England. The French Revolution served as a republican example, and the United Irishmen began to seek out a military alliance with France to assist in throwing off the English yoke. Tone's involvement in these efforts forced him to flee the country after he was found to have corresponded – at the encouragement of others and against his better judgement – with William Jackson, a French agent, about the possibility of military assistance for an Irish rebellion.⁵

After leaving Ireland, Tone lived for a few months in America before traveling to France in 1796 to seek a Franco-Irish alliance in earnest. He spent most of the rest of his life negotiating with the French Directory and eventually arranged for three military expeditions to be sent to Ireland: one at the end of 1796 that set sail but never landed due to poor weather,⁶ one in 1797 in conjunction with the Dutch Batavian Republic that never sailed at all,⁷ and the fateful 1798 expedition. In the spring of 1798, an unassisted rebellion broke out among the Irish people. Tone and his allies attempted to send French troops to coordinate with those efforts, but the Irish rebels had been defeated by the time French ships were sent.⁸ Although the French General Jean Joseph Amable Humbert did land troops in Ireland in August and won some early victories against the English, he could not sustain them and surrendered by September.⁹ Tone sailed on a later ship and was captured upon arriving in Ireland. Though he expected to be executed, Tone had enlisted in the French army and believed he had the right to be treated as a foreign prisoner

⁴ Ibid., 21-22.

⁵ Tone, "Statement of communications with William Jackson," 3 May 1794, in *Writings of Theobald Wolfe Tone*, eds. Moody, McDowell, and Woods, vol. 1, *Tone's Career in Ireland to June 1795* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 512-516.

⁶ Elliott, *Partners in Revolution*, 113.

⁷ Ibid., 159-160.

⁸ Ibid., 215-222.

⁹ Richard Hayes, *The Last Invasion of Ireland* (Dublin: McGill and Son, Ltd., 1939), 133-143.

of war and shot. When the Irish government declared that he would be hanged as a traitor instead, Tone slit his throat in prison to avoid this dishonorable death. He lingered for a few days afterward and died on November 19, 1798.¹⁰

The basic facts of Tone's life are well-established, but many of the details have remained open to debate in the intervening two centuries. His political views have been portrayed in a variety of different ways. Tone's writings make it clear that his republicanism was well-established by the mid-1790s, but other aspects of his politics are more difficult to discern. Some writers have suggested he was a champion of the people and perhaps a socialist, while others are inclined to emphasize his wariness of the Irish peasantry and other less radical viewpoints. As his memory has been associated with later Irish republican movements, he has become more of a symbol for these various causes than a man. All of these portrayals obscure the truth of his character.

Tone's political views have been debated partially because his extensive writings are available for study. These demonstrate the ways in which his opinions changed over time and depending on his situation and will always prompt debate, and such debates are close to exhausted. Tone's writings also reveal an area of his life that has thus far been neglected and deserves further attention: his skill as a politician and diplomat. This skill both complicates the task of determining his exact political views and makes doing so less relevant, as it is more useful to consider his writings as the works of a politician working to achieve a goal than a philosopher explaining his ideologies.

Considering Tone as a politician does not require viewing him as self-serving or untrustworthy. His first concern was always Ireland's welfare and, eventually, independence. However, he used his political skills to approach this goal pragmatically, constructing his

¹⁰ Elliott, *Wolfe Tone*, 374-385.

arguments to persuade his Irish and French audiences to support his views and hopes for Ireland's future. He was always careful about which opinions he presented in his Irish pamphlets and French negotiations, neglecting to state his true preferences when he knew that it would hurt his cause. He must therefore be analyzed as a politician working toward an independent Irish republic rather than solely as a republican ideologue.

By viewing Tone as a politician, historians can gain a better understanding of the successes and failures of the 1798 rebellion and the republican movement as a whole. His writings and actions affected the political construction of the rebellion itself. In 1796, Tone was by far the most significant Irish figure negotiating with the Directory, and he retained this importance even as more United Irishmen grew directly involved in later years. His political gains reveal the ways in which the French and Irish causes were compatible, while his missteps highlight their fundamental differences and misunderstandings. Throughout his career, Tone demonstrated a blend of pragmatism and naïveté, each applying to different subjects and with their own effects on his cause. He was not a perfect politician, but he operated within the political arena, and the skills he showed there have thus far been neglected or even downplayed by scholars.

Wolfe Tone's politics were variable and easily misinterpreted. They have also already been extensively debated. It is time to view him as a politician more concerned with pragmatic patriotism than a specific alignment. This will allow for a more thorough understanding both of Tone himself and the cause to which he dedicated his life. He should not be symbolically aligned with one perspective, as this obscures his true character. He was not a myth, but a flawed, adaptable, and brilliant man.

II. The Historiography of Wolfe Tone

A. Tone's Writings and Their Readers

Wolfe Tone has been a subject of interest for historians almost since the time of his death. His extensive journals and incomplete autobiography were made publicly available in *The Life of Theobald Wolfe Tone*, a collection edited and published by his wife Matilda and his son, William Theobald Wolfe Tone, in 1826.¹¹ These have been invaluable sources for scholars and admirers of Tone. However, the historians who have discussed Tone do not always agree on his political and social views, and several of them describe him inaccurately. The journals are not objective sources, and their multiple meanings can be difficult to interpret. Tone lacks complete information on several of the topics that he discusses, making the information in his journals dangerous to apply to topics other than his personal beliefs. The journals also indicate that Tone's opinions and objectives changed over time, which historians fail to account for when they take statements made at certain times and suggest that they represent views Tone held consistently.

For most of the last two centuries, William Tone's edition of his father's writings was the most common way for historians to access them. Tone's son and wife edited and removed certain parts of Tone's journals and autobiography, altering the character of several passages even when the cuts themselves were not extensive. As an example, William Tone frequently cut or minimized some of Tone's more negative remarks about Americans. The recent editions of Tone's writings by Moody, McDowell, and Woods offer the uncensored versions of the journals while noting the alterations William Tone made, allowing more precise analysis.¹² Much of the historiography on Tone predates these editions, and it is only more recent writers who have been

¹¹ Elliott, *Wolfe Tone*, 395-396.

¹² See Theobald Wolfe Tone, *The Writings of Theobald Wolfe Tone, 1763-1798*, edited by T. W. Moody, R. B. McDowell, and C. J. Woods, 3 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998-2007).

able to make proper use of them. This presents new opportunities for future historians concerned with Tone.

Tone is a difficult topic for many historians to discuss objectively. As he was a co-founder of the United Irishmen and considered one of the leaders of the 1798 rebellion, he has become an important figure in the Irish nationalist movement. This is part of the reason why so much writing on Tone exists, but it makes it crucial to keep historians' biases in mind when considering their works. It has been tempting for historians to portray Tone's beliefs as aligning with their own or with the strategies they think would be most beneficial to Ireland's political situation. Regardless of Tone's value as a symbol, he must also be considered as a historical figure with opinions that do not conform with modern values and cannot always be applied to modern conflicts.

Another important factor to bear in mind when considering the historiography of Tone is that although he has been a popular topic of discussion in broader studies of Irish history and the 1798 rebellion in particular, there have not been many truly in-depth analyses of his life and character. Marianne Elliott, Tone's most recent and most comprehensive biographer, has noted that previous works on Tone's life tended to be "hagiographic" and "devoid of any understanding of Tone's complex character and the context in which he operated."¹³ These other biographies were also almost all "purely derivative," based mostly on Tone's own autobiography without the clarification of other sources.¹⁴ As such, Elliott's biography is one of the only book-length works to attempt to analyze Tone's political character in depth. Other attempts, such as those by the following historians, have been shorter works such as pamphlets and articles. These

¹³ Elliott, *Wolfe Tone*, 1.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

works still fail to place Tone in his proper context and understand the depths of his political character, but the authors have made some attempt at deeper analysis.¹⁵

B. Tone as a Symbol: Hubert Butler

Hubert Butler provides an example of the tendency to see Tone as a symbol of a cause more than a complex person. His 1985 pamphlet, “Wolfe Tone and the Common Name of Irishman,” contains a talk first given in 1963 for the bicentennial of Tone’s birth. There is a deliberate political motive in this work, as the talks were intended to relate Tone’s story to that of contemporary Ireland, but Butler exaggerates certain parts of Tone’s writings in order to accomplish this goal.¹⁶ Butler is especially focused on Tone’s devotion to uniting the people of Ireland under the “common name of Irishman.”¹⁷ This frequently-cited phrase is quoted from a longer section of Tone’s 1796 autobiography, which Marianne Elliott has described as “the most quoted passage of Irish history”:¹⁸

“To subvert the tyranny of our execrable government, to break the connexion [*sic*] with England, the never failing source of all our political evils, and to assert the independance [*sic*] of my country – these were my objects. To unite the whole people of Ireland, to abolish the memory of all past dissensions, and to substitute the common name of Irishman in place of the denominations of Protestant, Catholic, and Dissenter – these were my means.”¹⁹

¹⁵ See Henry Boylan, *Wolfe Tone* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1981) for an example of one of the derivative and less analytical biographies.

¹⁶ Butler, “Wolfe Tone,” 9.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Elliott, *Wolfe Tone*, 395.

¹⁹ Tone, *Autobiography*, 7 August – 8 September 1796, in *The Writings of Theobald Wolfe Tone, 1763 – 1798*, eds. T. W. Moody, R. B. McDowell, and C. J. Woods, vol. 2, *America, France, and Bantry Bay, August 1795 to December 1796* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 301.

The attention Butler and others have paid to this quotation and to the “common name of Irishman” section in particular is understandable, as bringing together the different religious groups in Ireland was one of Tone’s biggest ambitions. However, Butler devotes so much attention to this topic that he obscures other aspects of Tone’s political and personal beliefs. Tone often failed to recognize and account for the reasons behind the divisions that existed in Irish culture, making some of his proposed solutions for those problems unlikely and impractical. His definition of the “common name of Irishman” was not one everyone in Ireland would have agreed with, though many of the ways he qualified the Irish character were in his private writings or addressed elsewhere, as will be discussed in later chapters. By focusing on the unqualified ideal of the “common name of Irishman,” Butler fails to show either Tone’s unrealistic idealism in the way he constructed that concept or his political pragmatism in using that ideal to attract others to his cause.

Butler’s portrait of Tone mythologizes and limits him. He describes Tone as a supporter of “romantic radicalism.”²⁰ While Tone did eventually become a radical who hoped to separate from England by revolution, he began by seeking legal reform of Ireland’s parliamentary system. There is evidence that Tone held more radical beliefs earlier on in his career, but he did not put them into practice until other methods had failed. His radicalism was more often expressed pragmatically than romantically. Tone was not devoid of idealism or romance, but they were expressed in different ways and Butler does not understand the ways in which they were problematic. When the 1798 rebellion broke out in Ireland without French assistance, Tone insisted in his journals that the rebels still had a chance at success if the French could reach them in time, even though their leadership was fragmenting and they were already on the verge of

²⁰ Butler, “Wolfe Tone,” 15.

defeat.²¹ Butler claims that the rebellion was not a “wild gesture of defiance” and “really might have succeeded,” falling into the same errors as Tone.²² Butler fails to understand Tone’s political pragmatism or the problematic nature of his idealism, which prevents him from fully grasping the complexities of Tone’s political career.

Butler is not the only writer to use Tone as a political symbol, but he demonstrates several of the common problems with this approach to studying Tone.²³ As a martyr for a cause that persisted in various forms for well over a century and even to the modern day, he makes a useful legend. However, obscuring Tone’s complexities prevents scholars from acknowledging the realities of his beliefs and his blend of naïveté and pragmatism. Later historians have made serious attempts to view Tone as more of a man than a myth. However, they have oversimplified his character and career in other ways.

C. Tone as a Socialist: C. Desmond Greaves

Writers such as Butler who have romanticized Tone’s politics have tended to over-emphasize his liberal tendencies, which, while prominent, were not the only views he expressed or the ones he always put into practice. Butler’s work was more concerned with Tone’s ideologies, but this trend also appears in works that discuss his personal history more extensively, such as C. Desmond Greaves’s pamphlet, “Theobald Wolfe Tone and the Irish Nation.” Greaves was a well-established scholar of Irish history. The pamphlet is a multi-chaptered work that Greaves states is intended to “provide a summary of Tone’s life, work and opinions, against the

²¹ Tone, Diary, 20 June 1798, in *The Writings of Theobald Wolfe Tone, 1763-1798*, eds. T. W. Moody, R. B. McDowell, and C. J. Woods, vol. 3, *France, the Rhine, Lough Swilly, and the Death of Tone, January 1797 to November 1798* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 309.

²² *Ibid.*, 16.

²³ For a more detailed discussion of the ways Tone has been used by various social and political groups, see “Conclusion – The Cult of Tone,” Elliott, *Wolfe Tone*, 395-401.

background of the emergence of Ireland as a modern nation.”²⁴ Greaves does note some of the problems with nineteenth-century Tone historiography, commenting that earlier writers tended to misinterpret the development of his political beliefs.²⁵ However, Greaves twists Tone’s political beliefs even further than Butler, portraying him as a champion of the proletariat in a socialistic class struggle, and this clouds his attempts at accuracy.

Greaves does start his discussion of Tone with an acknowledgement that he was not always a radical: he notes that Tone’s beliefs in youth were in line with those of his “bourgeois” class and that though he aligned himself with the Whigs, the liberal political party, he did not challenge the established governmental system.²⁶ However, he also claims from the beginning of the pamphlet that Tone’s devotion to religious unity was the “means” for an “**agrarian revolution** that would give the land to the people [emphasis Greaves’s],” implying that the poor agricultural workers of Ireland and their grievances were among Tone’s primary concerns.²⁷ Greaves’s phrasing suggests that Tone expected the agricultural workers of Ireland to control the redistribution of land, but the rest of Tone’s writings call this into question. Tone did claim a desire to support and unite all the people of Ireland and did comment on the peasantry of Ireland in his writings. However, as will be discussed in later chapters, he frequently used these references as persuasive techniques to compel his Irish allies and the French governmental officials to believe that the peasants would provide adequate support for their causes. Their agricultural concerns were much less of a priority for Tone in his role as a diplomat.

Tone and his fellow United Irishmen were primarily focused on issues like suffrage and equal representation in Parliament. Another United Irishman, Thomas Addis Emmet, recognized

²⁴ C. Desmond Greaves, “Theobald Wolfe Tone and the Irish Nation” (London: Connolly Publications Ltd., 1963), 2.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 13.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 13-14.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 2.

after the war when questioned by the Secret Committee of the House of Lords that the Catholic common people were much more concerned with the oppressive tithes they had to pay to the Protestant church.²⁸ Tone's writings did acknowledge the issue of tithes, but he devoted more attention to unity between religious groups, the United Irishmen's attempts at legislative reform, and later to republicanism in general. He also had a tendency to claim the Irish peasantry would all flock to his cause at the first sign of a rebellion and were natural soldiers, refusing to acknowledge the chance that they would have varying perspectives and that some might have reason to question a revolution.²⁹ At times he even disparaged them. His close friend Thomas Russell recounted an incident in which Tone claimed that though the "*sans culottes*" of Ireland would support a rebellion, they were "too ignorant for any thinking man to wish to see in power."³⁰

This remark was made in a private conversation not recounted by Tone himself, but similar remarks in Tone's writings make it likely Russell's description is accurate. In the memorandum he gave to William Jackson describing the state of Ireland for the French a few months after the incident Russell describes, he called the generally middle-class Dissenters, who made up the majority of the United Irishmen, "the most enlightened body of the nation," but said that the poorer Catholics were "in the lowest degree of ignorance."³¹ He made a similar claim about the ignorance of the peasantry during his negotiations in France two years later in conversation with Henri Clarke, a Directory official and one of Tone's main French contacts. Tone conceded that this ignorance was "thanks to [their] execrable government, whose policy it

²⁸ Irish Parliament, House of Lords, "Report from the Secret Committee of the House of Lords" (Dublin, 1798), JP .4454, Joly Collection, National Library of Ireland.

²⁹ See Tone, "First memorial to the French government on the present state of Ireland," 22 February 1796, *Writings of Theobald Wolfe Tone*, 2:66 for one example of this common trend.

³⁰ Thomas Russell, Diary, 18 January 1794, in *Journals and Memoirs of Thomas Russell*, edited by C. J. Woods (Blackrock: Irish Academic Press, 1991), 141.

³¹ Tone, "Memorandum on the situation of Ireland," 14-15 April 1794, *Writings of Theobald Wolfe Tone*, 1:507.

was to keep them in a state of barbarism,” but did not challenge it. Crucially, he once again described the Dissenters as “thoroughly enlightened” and added that he “had no doubt...[the Dissenters] would direct the public sentiment in framing a government.”³² Tone did not blame the Irish peasants for their ignorance, but he referred to it on multiple occasions and claimed that more “enlightened” groups would lead the formation of an Irish government while the peasants would passively follow them.

Throughout his pamphlet, Greaves carefully chooses evidence that makes Tone appear more radical. He references the quote from Russell’s journal but frames it in a very particular way to alter the meaning. Greaves writes that “Tone told his friend that the only hope was from the ‘san-culottes’ [sic]” after an attempt at parliamentary Catholic reform failed.³³ While Russell did record Tone saying something along those lines – “nothing to be expected from this country except from the *sans culottes*” – he then went on to call them ignorant and unsuited for power.³⁴ Greaves neglects to refer to the second half of the sentence or to any of the other times Tone called the peasants ignorant in his own writings. Similarly, in his discussion of Tone’s time in France – a brief account, given the extent to which Tone’s political beliefs developed there – he notes Tone’s comment in his journal that he would prefer the Jacobins to come into power again if the French government were to change.³⁵ This is true, but in the same journal entry, Tone wrote that the current members of the Directory were “both able and honest” and hoped that they would not resign.³⁶ His views on French politics were more complex than Greaves’s description implies.

³² Tone, Diary, 18 July 1798, *Writings of Theobald Wolfe Tone*, 1:244.

³³ Greaves, “Theobald Wolfe Tone,” 21.

³⁴ Russell, Diary, 18 January 1794, *Journals and Memoirs of Thomas Russell*, 141.

³⁵ Greaves, “Theobald Wolfe Tone,” 25.

³⁶ Tone, Diary, 12 March 1796, *Writings of Theobald Wolfe Tone*, 2:108.

Greaves also makes no mention of Tone's remarks later in the year after the attempted coup of Gracchus Babeuf. Tone noted some sympathy for the politics of Babeuf and his co-conspirators (though he believed at that time that the conspiracy had been led by Jean-Baptiste Drouet), but reiterated his support for the current French government and, tellingly, feared for the success of his expedition if the government were to change.³⁷ Tone's precise ideologies did not necessarily have vast implications for his political practices, and Babeuf's conspiracy did not alter his goal or his strategies. Aside from frustration at the frequent delays in the organization of the Irish expeditions, he was reluctant to criticize France's established government and prioritized the success of his expedition over other political considerations. Greaves's quotation of Tone's comment sympathizing with the Jacobins without the qualifying remarks hoping the current Directory stayed in power creates the impression that Jacobinism was more relevant to his actions than it ever was in reality.

Another example of Greaves's tendency to distort evidence is his quotation of a remark Tone made in his journal about the redistribution of the Irish gentry's property among the people on the eve of rebellion in 1798. Greaves quotes the passage as follows:

"The only accusation brought against the United Irishmen by their enemies is that they wish to break the connection with England...but it will be said the United Irishmen extend their views further; they go now for a distribution of property and an agrarian law. I know not whether they do so now. I am sure in June 1795 when I was forced to leave the country, they entertained no such ideas. If they have since taken root among them, the Irish gentry may accuse themselves...if such men in the issue lose their property, they are themselves to blame...They see Ireland only in their rent rolls, their places, their patronage and their

³⁷ Tone, Diary, 11 May 1796, *Writings of Theobald Wolfe Tone*, 2:179.

pensions. They shall perish like their own dung. Those who have seen them shall say ‘where are they?’”³⁸

Greaves calls this “one of [Tone’s] clearest pronouncements” and claims it indicates that he “fully appreciated the class basis of the impending struggle.”³⁹ As usual, Greaves is partially correct. Calling the statement “one of his clearest pronouncements” is questionable when Tone seems uncertain about whether the United Irishmen would have committed to such ideals, but Tone was definitely aware of the class divides in Ireland and their relation to the current conflict. However, the sections that Greaves has omitted from this passage (most of which are several sentences long) make references to the United Irishmen and their leaders controlling the revolution, such as Tone’s statement that “the United Irishmen have a great and glorious object to terminate their prospect and which sanctifies almost any means they may take to attain it.”⁴⁰ The United Irishmen had a noble goal and were justified, and they were the ones who would presumably control any redistribution of property. As was typical, Tone did not account for the agency and desires of the peasantry except when they aligned with his rhetoric and could be used to criticize the gentry. Tone did “appreciate” the class conflict in Ireland, but this did not mean he intended for the peasants to control their own fates.

Greaves and other historians of his time were working with limited sources, as the full uncensored editions of Tone’s journals were not readily available, but Greaves distorted even the evidence he had at hand to fit the conclusions he had already formed about Tone. Tone made positive statements about the peasantry on occasion, but he was not the socialist Greaves

³⁸ Quoted in Greaves, “Theobald Wolfe Tone,” 29. Minor editorial differences from the version in Tone, *Diary*, 27 April 1798, *Writings of Theobald Wolfe Tone*, 3:247-249. Ellipses are as written in Greaves’s quotation, and some omissions are not noted with ellipses.

³⁹ Greaves, “Theobald Wolfe Tone,” 29.

⁴⁰ Tone, *Diary*, 27 April 1798, *Writings of Theobald Wolfe Tone*, 3:248.

portrays. He also did not always put the more radical implications in his private writings into practice in his public essays or negotiations. He prioritized the achievement of his primary goals: first of parliamentary reform and later of independence for Ireland. In recent years, historians have made attempts at providing more nuanced perspectives on Tone, his politics, and his writings, though these can veer in the opposite direction and deemphasize Tone's real liberalism.

D. Misusing Tone's Writings: Seán Cronin

Seán Cronin's *For Whom the Hangman's Rope Was Spun* is a more nuanced portrayal of Tone's philosophies than Greaves's pamphlet, though Cronin occasionally makes Tone seem too conservative by framing quotations incorrectly. Unlike Butler and more carefully than Greaves, Cronin acknowledges the development of Tone's political beliefs over time, noting that at the start of the 1790s, he expressed no explicit republican views and may not have been committed to republicanism until 1796.⁴¹ Cronin is also more willing than Butler to discuss the gaps in Tone's understanding: he points out that Tone underestimated the influence of the clergy in Ireland and tended to oversimplify Ireland's complex religious and class divisions.⁴²

Although Cronin describes how Tone's beliefs changed over time, he does not always account for this in the way he uses evidence. He suggests that Tone exaggerated his disdain for England in negotiations with the French to gain their sympathy, but what he cites to support this is a proposal Tone made to the British government in 1788 to establish a military colony in the South Sea Islands.⁴³ This does not represent Tone's views on England nearly a decade later,

⁴¹ Seán Cronin, *For Whom the Hangman's Rope Was Spun: Wolfe Tone and the United Irishmen* (Dublin: Repsol Publishing, 1991), 104.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 102-106.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 38.

since he noted his dislike of England in his private writings in the intervening years, as in his letter to the future United Irishman Arthur O'Connor in 1795 where he declared that he “[traced] all [Ireland’s] miseries...to the blasting influence of England.”⁴⁴ Cronin also sometimes fails to account for content in Tone’s journals that contradicts his claims. He says that Tone seems moderate in comparison to some of the “out-and-out Jacobins” in the Belfast United Irishmen, yet Tone did express sympathy with the Jacobins more than once.⁴⁵ Greaves makes too much of those references, but Cronin first disregards them and then fails to analyze them. Neither scholar fully explores the ways Tone prioritized his political goals.

Cronin also tends to quote large segments of Tone’s journals with little authorial interpretation to explain what they imply or to place them in context. He includes the incident when Tone spoke positively of the Jacobins coming into power – “If there is to be an change, I confess I should be glad the Jacobins were to come again in to play” – but makes no remark on it at all, only placing it in the middle of a summary of Tone’s time in France.⁴⁶ Cronin does not account for the contradiction this creates in reference to his earlier remark that Tone was not a Jacobin. Quotes from Tone’s journals require explanation, particularly when he is misinformed or contradictory, and Cronin fails to provide this. This relates to perhaps one of the most common problems historians encounter when writing about Tone. Because his body of work is so extensive, it is tempting to find a quote supporting a certain point and use it without question, as Cronin does when he uses the example of the South Sea Islands proposal to claim Tone respected England.

⁴⁴ Tone to Arthur O'Connor, 20 October 1795, *Writings of Theobald Wolfe Tone*, 2:25-26. According to Tone’s son, Tone was unable to send the letter but did intend to.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 55.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 76.

Tone's work must always be placed in the contexts of the time and his other writings. Historians need to account for the changes in his beliefs and the ways he presented them over time and acknowledge the risk of placing too much importance on a single remark that is not supported elsewhere. The latter point is crucial when considering his journals in particular. They were originally written for his family and Thomas Russell and were not as deliberately constructed as his public-minded works, though he did sometimes discuss the process of framing his verbal or written arguments.⁴⁷ Not everything Tone wrote in them was meant seriously, and the distinction can be difficult to make.

As another Tone biographer, Marianne Elliott, has noted, Tone's journals "[mingle] serious moral purpose with ironic and frequently flippant humour."⁴⁸ Tone himself made a similar remark, noticing his own tendency to fall into "witty and facetious soliloquy" in the same journal entry where he more seriously reflected on the problems with Nicholas Madgett's plan of sending prisoners of war to conduct guerilla warfare in Ireland.⁴⁹ While his public and private writings both give insight into his character and politics, the journals cannot be read in the same way as his political essays and proclamations. Both have great value in regard to his political beliefs and practices, provided that they are treated differently. His essays and memorials were constructed with different goals in mind and show the ways he decided to present his arguments to convince his audience, while his journals hint at his true views but can be flippant or vague. By neglecting to incorporate these contexts and differences, Cronin fails to portray Tone's true talent as a politician.

⁴⁷ See Tone, *Diary*, 6 April 1797, *Writings of Theobald Wolfe Tone*, 2:179 for one of Tone's various comments on the intended audience of his journals.

⁴⁸ Elliott, *Wolfe Tone*, 30.

⁴⁹ Tone, *Diary*, 22 March 1796, *Writings of Theobald Wolfe Tone*, 2:121-123.

E. Tone in Full Biographical Study: Marianne Elliott

Marianne Elliott is the historian who has made the most comprehensive study of Tone's life and works. Her biography *Wolfe Tone: Prophet of Irish Independence* was initially published in 1989 and then revised into a second edition titled *Wolfe Tone* in 2012. Elliott contends in the introduction to the second edition that Tone "can only be understood in terms of a full biographical study," which she set out to conduct. She goes on to explain that no previous work on Tone had been based on "extensive original research," as few writers went beyond the *Life* published by Tone's wife and son.⁵⁰ Elliott's in-depth study of nearly every aspect of Tone's life is more detailed and accurate than any of the works by previous scholars.

Like Greaves and Cronin, Elliott notes Tone's somewhat more traditional moments in his early years. She expands on his activities at university and in Trinity College's Historical Society. During this time, he and many of his fellow students expressed support for the monarchy, though they still defended the rights of the people. At this point in his life, Tone associated with the conventionally liberal Whig party, praising the freedom provided by the British constitution but not advocating for change outside of the established governmental system. He could not have been called a radical.⁵¹ Later in life, while writing his autobiography, Tone claimed that he had never truly supported the Whigs' political platform and had simply found that the best option at the time, but Elliott challenges this and argues that he did agree with the Whigs at the time and was strongly influenced by them, as they were his "first instructors" in the world of politics.⁵² Throughout the biography, Elliott continues to discuss moments that challenge radical portrayals of Tone. A point she emphasizes is that Tone was "no democrat"

⁵⁰ Elliott, *Wolfe Tone*, 1.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 31-34.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 78-79.

and was consistently wary of giving any power to the common people he saw as ignorant.⁵³

Views such as this still aligned him more with traditional liberals like the Whigs, but they do demonstrate that he was not the socialist figure Greaves presented.

Elliott raises accurate points about Tone's wariness of the common people. However, her concern with correcting the errors of previous scholars distorts her portrait of Tone. She prioritizes debunking the portrayal of Tone as an "unflinching republican" and champion of the people that has been common in popular culture and historiography, which she attributes to the edits made in previous publications of Tone's writings.⁵⁴ Elliott's determination to challenge traditional views of Tone is a worthwhile goal, but in this she overcorrects. Tone could not have been called an "unflinching republican" during his time in Ireland when he was still working for parliamentary compromise, but he was devoted to republicanism once he arrived in France and considered some republican ideas beforehand. In addition to overemphasizing aspects of his political views, Elliott undercuts Tone's agency as a politician.

In challenging the view of Tone as a romantic revolutionary hero, Elliott goes too far and undermines his personal agency. She points out that Tone's political ideas were not original but drawn from other sources and framed in his writings to appeal to his audience. This topic has been debated, but on the whole Elliott is correct that Tone was content to use the political ideas of others rather than create his own.⁵⁵ However, this does not mean that Tone never took personal initiative in other ways. Elliott claims that Tone rarely made significant decisions of his own free will and was usually compelled to act by others.⁵⁶ This makes sense as a description for parts of his career in Ireland but is much more difficult to apply to his time in France. He did

⁵³ Ibid., 276.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 395.

⁵⁵ For a discussion of the debate on Tone's originality, see James Quinn, "Theobald Wolfe Tone and the Historians," *Irish Historical Studies* 32, no. 125 (2000), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30007020>, 123-125.

⁵⁶ Elliott, *Wolfe Tone*, 208.

travel to France at the request of others, but once there, his contact with the United Irishmen was limited and he conducted nearly all of the early negotiations with France and arranged for the 1796 expedition to Ireland on his own. Tone might have preferred to take orders from others – perhaps due to the lifelong fascination with the military made obvious by his journals or to the persistent deference to rank that Elliott identifies⁵⁷ – but there were many significant moments in his life when he did not. His political ideas were not original, but he consciously chose the ways in which he used them. Tone could not have made the diplomatic achievements that he did in France had he been as consistently deferential as Elliot argues. He relied on his own political skill.

Elliott also deemphasizes Tone’s role as a politician, undermining any possible enthusiasm for political office. She mentions his “deep contempt for conventional politics” from a young age.⁵⁸ Later, she stresses that Tone did not define himself as a political leader.⁵⁹ He did not envision himself as the leader of the Irish government, but he did have political desires. He admitted in his journals to a tendency toward ambition and a wish for power.⁶⁰ Specifically, he reflected more than once on the idea of becoming the Irish ambassador to France once Ireland’s independence had been established, recording the notion first in February 1796.⁶¹ Elliott acknowledges this desire but suggests that Tone quickly moved past it and wanted to return to his “pre-1795 role as conciliator and bridge between the Catholics and the Presbyterians” rather than continue to involve himself in international politics.⁶² Yet his journals reveal Tone was still “dreaming of being an ambassador” months later. It was secondary to Irish independence and

⁵⁷ Ibid., 229.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 56.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 297.

⁶⁰ Tone, Diary, 13 March 1796, *Writings of Theobald Wolfe Tone*, 2:109.

⁶¹ Tone, Diary, 18-20 February 1796, *Writings of Theobald Wolfe Tone*, 2:59-60.

⁶² Elliott, *Wolfe Tone*, 297.

his personal military goals, but Tone could and did picture himself in a high political office.⁶³

He understood himself as a politician in a way that Elliott and other modern historians have not.

Even more important than his personal political desires is Tone's skill as a diplomat. Both in Ireland and France, he demonstrated that he was adept at framing his ideas to get the response he desired from his audience. Personal advancement was not his primary goal, but Tone's political and diplomatic abilities should not be underestimated. Elliott is determined to minimize his connection to politics, but Tone's diplomatic skills require more historiographical attention.

Elliott is incorrect that Tone never expressed a serious desire to hold political office, but his concern with personal advancement is not the facet of his career that requires the most examination. Tone was very skilled in political arenas and was able to convince both Irish and French audiences to support his causes. Examining Tone as a practical negotiator for the Irish cause is a more productive approach than attempting to determine precise political beliefs, particularly as those beliefs varied over time and according to his audience. He was a careful and pragmatic man who adopted specific strategies to accomplish his political goals. Elliott does not romanticize him as other authors have, but she minimizes his agency and accomplishments as a diplomat. In setting out to provide a more complete and correct portrait of Tone, Elliott instead deemphasizes the wrong aspects of his career.

⁶³ Tone, Diary, 28 June 1796, *Writings of Theobald Wolfe Tone*, 2:217.

III. Tone's Political Views and Goals

A. Tone's Vision for Ireland

1. The Rights of the People

The portrayal of Tone as a champion of the people of Ireland, thus far common in historiography, is more of an oversimplification than an outright inaccuracy, though some of the evidence writers like Greaves and Butler have used to support it is incorrect. The primary error is failing to portray the multiple aspects of Tone's character and how he functioned as a pragmatic politician. He expressed negative views about Ireland's peasantry both privately and publicly and did not always understand or support their goals, but he also did intend to preserve their rights in his independent Ireland. This remained constant in his writings even as he shifted his language to please his audiences, particularly after his arrival in France. Tone prioritized the rights he thought were reasonable and politically viable, especially republicanism, which would grant the people more influence in their government, as well as religious freedom.

Tone has been called the "father of Irish republicanism." Historians like Cronin and Elliott have cast doubt on this title, and Tone did not advocate for republicanism throughout his entire career. However, by the time he arrived in France, he was convinced that Ireland, once independent, would have to be established as a republic, and he repeatedly rejected monarchical governments where the people would not be granted as much power.

Elliott has claimed that Tone's "republican career" did not truly begin until he was exiled from Ireland in 1795 in consequence of the William Jackson affair.⁶⁴ It is true that Tone's career prior to that point was more concerned with Catholic emancipation and reform of the parliament under Ireland's existing government, but he considered republican ideas even then. Tone wrote a pamphlet in March of 1793 in the guise of an anonymous laborer, a rhetorical technique he used

⁶⁴ Elliott, *Wolfe Tone*, 3.

on multiple occasions. This work, like many of Tone's first political pamphlets, argued that the Irish should not be forced to support and thereby spend resources on the wars of the English – in this case, England's war against France. In addition to insisting that the Irish had no quarrels with France and that they should therefore be allowed not to participate in the war, Tone examined the political situation in France and the actions of the people. He declared that the execution of Louis XVI, while "very shocking and barbarous," was an internal French matter that did not warrant outside interference from other nations.⁶⁵

Tone then discussed the claims that war was necessary because the French were "republicans and levellers [*sic*]." Again, he argued that such things might be "wicked and abominable" but were French concerns alone. However, this was not as clear a statement as the condemnation of the king's execution. Tone went on to write, "If a Republic be a bad form of Government, in God's name let them have it and punish themselves; if it be a good form, I do not know what right we have to hinder them of it."⁶⁶ He allowed for the possibility that a republic could be a beneficial type of government, though he offered other possible interpretations.

The statement that the people had the right to choose their own government was an indication of republican tendencies in itself, although the rest of the pamphlet and the rhetorical techniques Tone used complicate this. The remarks on government were not Tone's primary arguments in the pamphlet, as he focused on the detrimental effects the war would have on trade. The persona Tone used in writing also deserves consideration: he claimed to be a "poor manufacturer" whose livelihood was at stake if Ireland should go to war, and he separated this

⁶⁵ Tone, "To the manufacturers of Dublin," March 1793, *Writings of Theobald Wolfe Tone*, 1:419-421.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

character from the “great people” who made the real political decisions.⁶⁷ He was not speaking as a man with any significant education or political background. Put in the mouth of an uneducated speaker, the claim about republicanism comes off in context as more of a casual remark by a man who is unconcerned with or unaware of its broader implications. Tone was claiming in his poor manufacturer’s voice that whether or not France had a republican government was irrelevant to the Irish, who needed to be more concerned with the financial consequences they would experience in the event of war. On the surface, it was far from a definitive endorsement of republicanism.

Tone himself was much more educated and politically active than this persona, of course, and may have used the character to state his real views in a safer context, but the lack of other writings on the topic from the same period makes it difficult to be certain whether or not he was a republican at this point. However, the pamphlet does show the influence of the French Revolution and that Tone was considering republican ideas in 1793. Regardless of his precise opinions, he could not publicly argue for republicanism in Ireland at this point while he still hoped to succeed through legal methods. By the time Tone went to France, he was a committed republican and prioritized his vision of Ireland as a republic above other options.

When Tone began negotiating with the French government over their plans to liberate Ireland in 1796, he insisted that the only acceptable form of government would be a republic. In his first memorial to the Directory explaining the situation of Ireland, he emphasized that his allies, the Presbyterian Dissenters, were all republicans and that he sought to make Ireland into a “free republic.”⁶⁸ This became a constant theme throughout his political essays and the

⁶⁷ Ibid., 421.

⁶⁸ Tone, “First memorial to the French government on the current state of Ireland,” 22 February 1796, *Writings of Theobald Wolfe Tone*, 2:65-66.

memorials he directed to the French government, as well as in his personal journals.⁶⁹ He insisted on it despite occasional obstacles and would not accept alternatives.

Tone was highly opposed to establishing any kind of monarchy in Ireland, as he felt this would have limited the rights of the people and led to the same sorts of problems as before. To his constant bafflement and frustration, Tone discovered that several of the French officials he spoke with were more concerned with weakening England's situation by creating an independent Ireland than the specific Irish government that would result. Clarke asked him on multiple occasions if the people of Ireland would not prefer a monarchy to a republic, and Tone immediately denied it each time.⁷⁰ Even Lazare Hoche, the general who led the 1796 expedition to Ireland and a man Tone otherwise very much admired, discussed the possibility of establishing a monarchy more than once.⁷¹ Tone rejected even the possibility that anyone in Ireland would like to establish a monarchy on all of these occasions and declared that the only acceptable government would be a republic. By the time Tone arrived in France, republicanism was the defining aspect of Tone's philosophy and he would no longer accept the moderate compromises he had worked for with the United Irishmen. Working outside the legal methods of reforming Ireland's government made it politically viable for him to take this approach.

Tone was also very concerned with the proper separation of church and state, having seen the disastrous ways the Catholics and Dissenters of Ireland were barred from political participation due to not ascribing to the majority religion. His perspective on this issue was occasionally naïve: he insisted that religion had little to no influence over the minds of most of

⁶⁹ See Tone, "Second memorial to the French government on the present state of Ireland," 29 February 1796, *Writings of Theobald Wolfe Tone*, 2:88-97, and the diary entries for 26 February 1796 (2:83-87), 7 March 1796 (2:101-103), and 14 March 1796 (2:109-114), as well as numerous other examples in Tone's post-1795 writings, for his public and private commitments to republicanism.

⁷⁰ See Tone's diary entries for 13 April 1796 (*Writings of Theobald Wolfe Tone*, 2:153-156) and 9 May 1796 (2:177-178).

⁷¹ See Tone's diary entries for 12 July 1796 (*Writings of Theobald Wolfe Tone*, 2:232-235) and 23 July 1796 (2:249-254).

the Irish people anymore, when in fact it still significantly mattered to many of them.⁷² Despite this unrealistic approach, his commitment to preventing a state religion from being established in an independent Ireland was genuine.⁷³ Tone's ideal Ireland undeniably had a republican government selected by the people and freedom of religion, though other aspects of his vision showed his restraint and wariness of the people he was working to liberate.

2. Restricted Rights

One right Tone discussed limiting in his journals was the freedom of the press. He held that the French government was far too liberal when it came to the freedoms they allowed the press. Permitting the government and its officials to be publicly insulted could very well lead to their downfall. "It is hard that in the only government emanating from the choice of the people, liberty should be made the instrument of her own destruction," Tone remarked.⁷⁴ He then clarified that he did not advocate destroying the freedom of the press, but that he would "restrain it within just and reasonable limits."⁷⁵ He argued that both the people and the government would be safer if there were strict laws preventing such risky criticisms and that "it is less dangerous for a government to be feared, or even hated, than despised."⁷⁶ It was better that once the people had chosen their own government, it could not be freely insulted. This was one freedom that Tone was not willing to grant.

Tone's comments on the treatment of the press in other nations also have interesting implications. America, Tone claimed, was much less liberal with the freedom they granted the

⁷² The diary entries for 14 March 1796 (*Writings of Theobald Wolfe Tone*, 2:109-114) and 12 July 1796 (2:232-235) are examples of this, as well as his "Observations on Instructions intended for Eugene Ahearn" (22 April 1796, 2:158-160).

⁷³ Tone, Diary, 18 July 1796, *Writings of Theobald Wolfe Tone*, 2:245.

⁷⁴ Tone, Diary, 27 April 1797, *Writings of Theobald Wolfe Tone*, 3:70.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 71.

press, and “surely, if rational liberty exists upon the earth, it is in the United States.”⁷⁷ Tone’s views on the American government and people were often negative, but on this occasion, he considered them the superior option. In addition to America, Tone cited England as a nation where the freedoms of the press were properly limited.⁷⁸ This was a notable contrast to his usual insistence that France was far superior to England and showed that he was willing to consider taking inspiration even from a nation he loathed when he thought it would be beneficial to Ireland.

Tone’s disdainful views of the peasantry contributed to his more cautious provisions for Ireland. His denigrating or condescending remarks regarding Ireland’s lower classes appear throughout his writings and affected his ideas for Ireland’s future government. In one of his memorials to the French government explaining the situation in Ireland, he claimed that Ireland would not benefit from a purely lower-class insurrection, as those people would not be able to form an effective government.⁷⁹ He also implied a desire to limit their participation even in a more organized administration. The same memorial described a “national convention” that would be formed as the preliminary government, consisting of delegates chosen by Dissenters and former members of the Catholic Committee – groups that, though barred from political participation at that time, were wealthier and more educated than the average citizens.⁸⁰ The concept of forming a government of representatives of the people was not in itself at all a conservative idea, but Tone defined those representatives specifically as members of his own class and did not allow for the possibility that other groups would serve in the government directly.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Tone, “Second memorial to the French government on the present state of Ireland,” 29 February 1796, *Writings of Theobald Wolfe Tone*, 2:92.

⁸⁰ Ibid, 91-92.

Similarly, the convention would soon publish a proclamation “to the people of Ireland notifying their independence [*sic*] and their alliance with the French Republic.”⁸¹ Despite Tone’s declarations that all the people of Ireland desired a republic and an alliance with France, his ultimate vision was that they would be informed of this rather than declaring it themselves. Tone was more liberal than the average politician of his period, but his wariness of the common people complicates this position. He was interested in republicanism from the early 1790s and devoted to it afterward, but there were limits to the powers he would grant the people once a republic had been established. Creating an independent government on his own terms came before the specific rights and concerns of the peasantry.

Tone traveled to a variety of republican nations after his flight from Ireland in 1795. His observations of these foreign governments helped him to further develop his ideals and his intentions for Ireland. However, political concerns prevented him from viewing all of these nations objectively, particularly France, on which he relied to secure Ireland’s independence. Tone’s reflections on foreign governments indicate both the development of his pragmatic political character and his occasional willful naïveté.

B. Tone on American Politics

1. Initial Positive Views of America

Several foreign governments inspired Tone and helped shape his political views. His reactions to other nations’ governments also show his development as a politician and diplomat. He eventually worked with France, but America and its revolution were enormous influences for Tone due to their shared past as British colonies. He cited them frequently, particularly early in his career. In an essay written in 1790 for the political club Tone belonged to before the

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 92.

formation of the United Irishmen, Tone declared that the Irish “had ceased to remember that [they] were a nation, or that [they] had a name, ‘till the genius of American liberty burst asunder a sleep that seemed the slumber of death.”⁸² He compared Ireland to America in private writings as well. Just after the United Irishmen were formed, on meeting with an American acquaintance, Thomas Attwood Digges, Tone was curious to know if the United Irishmen “in any way resembled the committees of America in 1775 & afterwards.” Digges informed him that they did “precisely,” as Tone recorded in his journal.⁸³ Tone compared the situation to Ireland to that of America and looked to America as a model for the Irish cause.

In September of 1792, Tone wrote a summary of the US Constitution that appeared in the *Northern Star*, a newspaper published by the United Irishmen. In this, he emphasized the lack of noble titles and rank in America, as well as the freedoms of religion, speech, the press,⁸⁴ and assembly and the right to bear arms, all of which were forbidden to some portion of the people of Ireland.⁸⁵ Tone was particularly impressed with the freedom of religion, though he did note that “In one state only there is a kind of Protestant Ascendancy, but that is confined to their own domestic legislature.”⁸⁶ He presumably referred to the 1778 Constitution of South Carolina, which declared that Protestantism was the established religion of the state and that only Protestants could serve in the government.⁸⁷ Aside from this, which Tone noted only briefly, he was pleased with the state and federal constitutions. The qualities he praised revealed the rights he saw as necessary in an independent Ireland.

⁸² Tone, “On the English Connection,” 29 June 1790, *Writings of Theobald Wolfe Tone*, 1:91.

⁸³ Tone, Diary, 19 October 1791, *Writings of Theobald Wolfe Tone*, 1:141.

⁸⁴ Tone did not comment on the necessary restrictions of the freedom of the press at this time, only years later when he had directly observed both France and America.

⁸⁵ Tone, “Summary of the constitution of America,” a. 6 September 1792, *Writings of Theobald Wolfe Tone*, 1:268.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 1:267.

⁸⁷ S. C. Const. of 1778, arts. III, XII, XIII, and XXXVIII. Similar provisions had existed in the Georgia Constitution of 1777, but these were superseded by the Georgia Constitution of 1789.

2. Criticisms on Arriving in America

In 1795, as part of the fallout from the William Jackson affair, Tone was forced to leave Ireland and lived in America for a time before traveling to France. This experience significantly altered his views on the American people and government. In September 1795, about a month after his arrival in Philadelphia, he wrote a letter to Russell detailing all the problems he saw. Philadelphians were “a selfish, churlish, unsocial race,” far too concerned with money. America as a whole had developed into an aristocracy, despite the lack of titled nobility. Even George Washington was “a high-flying aristocrat” who had been corrupted by power, and Tone questioned the idea of placing so much power in one person at all. Tone saw true republicans only in the House of Representatives, considering the rest of the government to be aristocrats. “What is it to me whether it is an aristocracy of merchants or of peers, elective or hereditary? It is still an aristocracy, incompatible with the existence of genuine liberty,” he wrote. He also felt that America’s refusal to grant assistance to the French was an act of ingratitude after the French aid given to the American Revolution and that the nation was becoming too much like England.⁸⁸

Tone recanted some of the more extreme criticisms in another letter to Russell. He wrote that the “practical excellence” of the American governmental system left “little ground for discontent,” which seems at odds with the railing against aristocracy in his other letter.⁸⁹ He clarified that his earlier observations about the people referred to Philadelphians specifically, whom he still insisted were “a most disgusting race, eaten up with all the vice of commerce, and that vilest of all pride, the pride of the purse.” Even then, he praised Pennsylvania’s government as “the best under heaven” later in the letter.⁹⁰ Despite these qualifications to his critiques, his later writings suggest that while he may not have ultimately been as opposed to the American

⁸⁸ Tone to Russell, 1 September 1795, *Writings of Theobald Wolfe Tone*, 2:11-13.

⁸⁹ Tone to Russell, 25 October 1795, *Writings of Theobald Wolfe Tone*, 2:30.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 32.

federal and state governments as he was in his first letter, he was still disillusioned and no longer viewed them as ideal systems. He saw flaws in the American government that he did not want to imitate when Ireland became independent.

3. Reflections on America in France

Upon leaving America and traveling to France in early 1796, Tone spoke with several governmental officials. In one of Tone's meetings with Charles Delacroix, the French Minister of Foreign Affairs, Delacroix raised the topic of America's ingratitude to France that Tone had touched on in his letter to Russell. Tone immediately promised Delacroix that Ireland's case would be different, speaking of America "in the strongest terms which contempt and indignation could supply."⁹¹ This remark could be another example of Tone saying what his audience wanted to hear, but Tone disparaged the American people and government in his private writings as well. After one meeting with future president James Monroe, then serving as the American minister to France, Tone wrote in his journal that Monroe spoke "like a true republican" and mused, "How came he to be an American?"⁹² In Tone's eyes, Americans usually failed to express true republican beliefs.

Later that spring, during a meeting with Nicholas Madgett, an Irishman who headed the French Bureau of Translation, Tone discussed his future plans and noted that he wanted to settle his family in France rather than in America, which he and his wife both "detested, as well the people as the country."⁹³ A few days later, Tone wrote in his journal about his dissatisfaction with the fact that the French government had provided exceptions for Americans to remain in their country when they were expelling other foreigners, "not merely on account of their own

⁹¹ Tone, Diary, 26 February 1796, *Writings of Theobald Wolfe Tone*, 2:86.

⁹² Tone, Diary, 28 February 1796, *Writings of Theobald Wolfe Tone*, 2:87.

⁹³ Tone, Diary, 22 May 1796, *Writings of Theobald Wolfe Tone*, 2:189.

demerits, tho' they are bad enough," but because English spies often claimed to be Americans.⁹⁴ In general, after his poor reaction in Philadelphia, Tone criticized the American people more than the American government. However, as Tone had originally admired America as a country where the people could govern, defects in the people could then result in flaws in the governmental system. After he had lived in America and France, Tone's writings show that America had disappointed him and France had become more of an inspiration for Ireland's future. He praised both the French people and the government and seemed at times to be deliberately avoiding topics he would be forced to criticize.

C. Tone on French Politics

1. Praise of the Directory and Wariness of the Terror

Tone's summary of the American Constitution and later reaction to America itself suggest that Tone had an ideal vision of the nation that he could not maintain upon living there. However, he did not react the same way upon arriving in France. Tone supported and praised the French people and government, even in his private writings. He did occasionally hint at dissatisfaction with certain actions the French government had taken, particularly during the period of the Terror, but even then he was vague and did not elaborate on his exact feelings or the reasoning behind them.

Tone arrived in France in early 1796, when the Reign of Terror had been over for well over a year and the Directory was in control. Although he encountered difficulties and delays in dealing with the Directory, he still described it positively, noting that as a government it was

⁹⁴ Tone, Diary, 27 May 1796, *Writings of Theobald Wolfe Tone*, 2:191-192.

“very strong” and that he had “the greatest faith in their talents.”⁹⁵ He also had more specific praise for some of their decisions, such as compelling their enemies to come to Paris to negotiate peace and employing young men as generals.⁹⁶ While mostly positive, these comments were not unqualified by criticism: Tone was irritated at the Directory’s internal rivalries, complaining that “Every man here must do everything for himself” when the various ministers he sought grew annoyed that he brought his concerns to more than one of them.⁹⁷ Still, he primarily described the Directory as a positive model of government and was careful to distance it from actions taken during the Terror.

Tone’s remarks on the Terror in his journals are brief and vague. While he did not regard it as a positive example, his exact thoughts can be difficult to determine. One example of this occurred in March 1796 when he discussed the French aristocracy in his journal. While he did not support them, he was not as opposed to them as he was to the aristocracies he saw in England and America, saying, “I can hardly be angry with them.” He felt that the events of the French Revolution had sufficiently humbled them so that they could never regain power, and he did not view them as a threat. He claimed not to sympathize much with the trials that they had experienced, commenting that “there is so much fanciful grievance mixed with severe actual suffering that it abates a good deal of the compassion I should otherwise feel for them.” Tone briefly acknowledged how the aristocrats had suffered in the revolution and the Terror in particular, but decided that many of their problems were not worth considering. Throughout this

⁹⁵ Tone, Diary, 10 May 1796, 7 March 1796, *Writings of Theobald Wolfe Tone*, 2:179; Tone, Diary, 14 June 1796, 7 March 1796, *Writings of Theobald Wolfe Tone*, 2:203.

⁹⁶ Tone, Diary, 4 July 1796, *Writings of Theobald Wolfe Tone*, 2:223; Tone, Diary, 16 July 1796, *Writings of Theobald Wolfe Tone*, 2:238.

⁹⁷ Tone, Diary, 9 April 1796, *Writings of Theobald Wolfe Tone*, 2:150.

passage, Tone did not directly reference the actual violence against the aristocrats that led to their current position, only speaking vaguely of their “downfall.”⁹⁸

In general, Tone’s brief remarks in his journal on the Terror appear intended to distance his own views and those of French groups he sympathized with from it. His comment sympathizing with the Jacobins was careful to praise “not the Terrorists but the true original Jacobins who had made the Revolution.”⁹⁹ Other allusions were similarly brief: in describing the character of the French in general, he wrote that they were “a human people, when they [were] not mad, and [he liked] them with all their faults, and the guillotine at the head of them.”¹⁰⁰ His most detailed commentary on the Terror appeared in one of the addresses to the Irish peasantry he intended to have distributed once the 1796 expedition landed in Ireland, where he wrote that “the [French] Government was unfortunately for some time in the hands of men utterly devoid of humanity and feeling, who sacrificed without distinction the innocent and the guilty to their own avarice, ambition, or revenge.”¹⁰¹ This quote details much more explicit problems with the Terror than Tone ever wrote in his journals, presumably since Tone was trying to convince his audience that this revolt would not follow the same course of events as the French Revolution. Tone was also careful to refer to these events as having occurred in the past, separating them from the actions of the Directory.

Although he praised the Directory in general and specific decisions they made, Tone did not often remark on the exact workings of the government itself. He played no direct governmental role himself at any point in his life, and he offered little commentary on the Directory’s policies as a whole, which complicates analysis of his praise. The Directory took

⁹⁸ Tone, Diary, 7 March 1796, *Writings of Theobald Wolfe Tone*, 2:101.

⁹⁹ Tone, Diary, 12 March 1796, *Writings of Theobald Wolfe Tone*, 2:108.

¹⁰⁰ Tone, Diary, 21 March 1796, *Writings of Theobald Wolfe Tone*, 2:119.

¹⁰¹ Tone, “An Address to the Peasantry of Ireland,” 1. 14 October 1796, *Writings of Theobald Wolfe Tone*, 2:348.

power in a reaction against the excesses of the Terror. It enacted several more conservative measures than earlier revolutionary governments, such as property requirements for voting rights, and, as Georges Lefebvre has argued, showed a concern for stopping popular movements from rising altogether.¹⁰² Tone did not acknowledge these changes and only rarely distinguished between the various revolutionary governments at all, making it difficult to tell exactly what he was referencing when he praised the French government. He might not have known the detailed policies enacted by the different leaders. It is also possible that he did not want to dwell on aspects of the Directory he found less positive due to his reliance on them to advance his own cause. As with many of Tone's decisions, this reveals both idealism and pragmatism: he wanted to view the Directory positively since he admired the French, but he also relied on them to advance his cause and knew that criticizing them would not help him. His more negative remarks also imply this conclusion.

2. Sympathy with Critics of the Directory

Another journal entry shortly afterward, where Tone wrote about the Jacobins in the incident described by C. Desmond Greaves, contains some implied criticism of the Directory, though again Tone did not attack it outright. Tone learned from Madgett that the Directory were potentially on the verge of resigning and commented that he would regret it if they did, because he saw them as "both able and honest." However, he added that he had heard that the Jacobin party had the opportunity to re-enter the government, and as above, he distinguished them from the Terrorists. Tone admitted that if the government changed, he would want the Jacobins to

¹⁰² Georges Lefebvre, *The Directory*, trans. Robert Baldick (New York: Random House, 1964), 4.

take charge, as he “always had a leaning to that party.” He added that he felt that the current incarnation of the Directory would benefit from “a little more energy.”¹⁰³

This journal entry supports the conclusion that Tone preferred the original Jacobins to the current Directory. Still, he danced around stating it directly and would not outright commit to supporting them when it endangered his cause, making it not quite as strong a conclusion as Greaves implies. Ireland’s cause was more important to him than the political leanings of the French government, whatever his preferences truly were. This was in Tone’s personal journal, so there was no specific reason for him to be so diplomatic. Perhaps Tone was discontented with how he and his cause had been treated by the Directory thus far, but was hesitant to admit even to himself that he might not be able to gain the support he desired.

Tone’s feelings on the Directory and ideal governmental visions are also implied by another journal entry written a few months later. In May 1796, Tone recounted the fall of the Conspiracy of the Equals, which he described as “a grand plot to massacre [the Directory], the Legislative bodies, the *État-Major* of Paris...and to proclaim the constitution of 1793.”¹⁰⁴ Tone attributed the leadership of the conspiracy to Jean-Baptiste Drouet,¹⁰⁵ adding that he was “heartily sorry for him, for [he believed him] him sincere in his principles and an undoubted republican.”¹⁰⁶ Tone’s sympathy for the man implies some endorsement of his political beliefs, particularly given that he specifies him as “an undoubted republican” and Tone was very attached to republican ideals. If Drouet was undoubtedly a republican, did that imply that the

¹⁰³ Tone, Diary, 12 March 1796, *Writings of Theobald Wolfe Tone*, 2:108.

¹⁰⁴ Tone, Diary, 11 May 1796, *Writings of Theobald Wolfe Tone*, 2:179.

¹⁰⁵ This reference is odd, as the leader of the plot was in fact François-Noël Babeuf, whose name Tone did not mention. He referred to Drouet’s famous prevention of the king’s escape at Varennes in 1791 and Drouet’s later imprisonment in Austria, so he had some knowledge of Drouet’s life and had not simply confused his name with Babeuf’s. It is not clear from the journal entry whether Tone had accidentally conflated the two men, recognized them as separate people but thought that Drouet led the conspiracy instead of Babeuf, or mistaken the names in some other way.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

government he had tried to bring down favored different principles? Tone had already been forced to explain to Clarke that he would not tolerate a monarchy in Ireland and would have similar conversations with Hoche in the coming months, so he had reason to doubt the Directory's republicanism. However, the rest of the journal entry again complicates and obscures Tone's true political thoughts on the situation.

Despite his sympathy for Drouet, Tone decided he was glad that the plot had not succeeded. He wrote that the current system was "an exceeding good form of government," but he also admitted that it could be better.¹⁰⁷ However, he then explained that, in spite of that opinion, he would not want the government to change. His reasoning behind this varied throughout the journal entry. He claimed initially that it would not be worth the bloodshed that would result from another revolution even if the government could be improved. Then he added, "As an Irishman I cannot but rejoice at the discovery of this *complot*. Had it succeeded, what would have become of us?"¹⁰⁸ Tone's fears of losing the gains he had made for the Irish cause exceeded his concerns about another destructive revolution. He had already built a relationship with and gained promises of support from the Directory, and he could not risk losing that to a new government that might not support him, particularly since the transitional period between the administrations would cause delays in any event. Despite his praise, Tone's honest views on the value of the Directory as a system of government are very difficult to determine because they are colored by the fact that he relied on them for his Irish expedition to have any hope of success. Had he been independent from the Directory, he would have assessed them differently.

Tone wrote little on the conspiracy afterward, which also makes it difficult to determine his opinions on the political ideas involved. He mentioned it again several days later only to note

¹⁰⁷ Tone, Diary, 11 May 1796, *Writings of Theobald Wolfe Tone*, 2:179.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

again how disastrous it would have been for his cause had the plot succeeded, as he learned that part of the plan was to imprison foreigners and surmised that he could have then been executed.¹⁰⁹ While Tone was opposed to this plan on personal grounds, it was only a few days later that he praised the Directory for working to expel foreigners from Paris for economic reasons and in fact wished that they would have fewer exceptions in favor of Americans.¹¹⁰ Tone did not want these people imprisoned or executed, only forced to leave Paris, so in that way his views were less extreme than the report he had heard of Babeuf's. These entries again demonstrate how Tone's pragmatism required him to favor the current French government: the Directory had made exceptions to allow Tone to remain in Paris when others were compelled to leave, but he had no guarantee that any new system put in place would treat him in the same way. This made him unable to judge the Directory objectively and complicates attempts to determine which governmental systems and policies he actually favored and which were convenient to his cause at certain times. Tone's writings from his time in France both hint at and obscure his political inclinations.

D. Tone on Dutch Politics

During the 1797 attempt at sending a Dutch expedition to Ireland, Tone spent time in the Batavian Republic, a sister-republic created by the French in Holland prior to Tone's arrival in France. Though his time there was concerned primarily with military planning and procedures, Tone also spent a short time observing the French-influenced Dutch government. This was especially relevant to Tone given the ever-present fear that the French would attempt to exercise too much control over Ireland after they had helped it to become independent, and his reflections

¹⁰⁹ Tone, Diary, 20 May 1796, 187-188.

¹¹⁰ Tone, Diary, 27 May 1796, 191-192.

on the Dutch government in his journals provide insights into his political views and goals for Ireland.

In April of 1797, during a reprieve from his military duties, Tone set off to visit the Dutch Convention. Along the way, upon meeting and dining with several members of the Convention, he remarked that they reminded him of the leaders of the Catholic Committee, for whom he had worked in Ireland.¹¹¹ This itself is an indication that he looked upon them very favorably, as despite occasional disagreements, Tone frequently remarked on his great respect for the members of the Catholic Committee. When he discussed them in one of his memorials to the Directory, he claimed that there was “nowhere to be found men of purer patriotism, more sincerely attached to the principles of liberty, or who would be more likely in an arduous crisis to conduct themselves with abilities and firmness.”¹¹²

Upon reaching the Convention, Tone made several telling remarks. He was pleased by the salaries paid to the government functionaries, noting that this made the Batavian Republic more efficient than the French government, who could not pay as well and therefore had more careless workers.¹¹³ This was one of Tone’s rare direct criticisms of the French government, and it is noteworthy that he praised the Batavian Republic’s system over theirs. While Tone likened Ireland to France in his writings, its position if it was liberated by the French would be more akin to that of the Batavian Republic, and comparisons to its government would be more immediately relevant.

Unsurprisingly, Tone was concerned with the role of religion in the Dutch government. The session of the Convention that he witnessed concerned whether the Dutch people should be

¹¹¹ Tone, Diary, 26 April 1797, *Writings of Theobald Wolfe Tone*, 3:66.

¹¹² Tone, “First memorial to the French government on the current state of Ireland,” *Writings of Theobald Wolfe Tone*, 2:68.

¹¹³ Tone, Diary, 27 April 1797, *Writings of Theobald Wolfe Tone*, 3:68.

required by law to provide salaries for their priests. Tone, naturally, did not think that there should be any state-supported religion, commenting that America and France – regardless of his otherwise very different thoughts on those two nations – did not have a legally required salary for their clergy. The situation in Ireland, where the people had to pay tithes to the established church even if they were not members of it, had convinced Tone of the evils of state religion, and he hoped that the Batavian Republic would align more closely to France’s example.¹¹⁴

Tone also observed upon visiting the Convention that members of the clergy sat in it, as well as aristocrats. Tone’s commentary on this was surprisingly limited, though he did note that they did not control the Convention or all vote along the same party lines. He was later informed by “an honest Dutch patriot” who explained several aspects of the Convention to him that the Dutch intended to forbid the clergy from sitting in the legislature once they had finalized their constitution. Tone neither praised nor criticized this sentiment, though his other remarks on religion in government and his general approval of the man with whom he was speaking suggest that he at least did not object to such a plan.¹¹⁵

Tone concluded his discussion of the Dutch Convention by listing all the governing bodies he had observed: “the Parliament of Ireland, the Parliament of England, the Congress of the United States of America, the *Corps Législatif* of France, and the *Convention Batave* [Dutch Convention.]” He also mentioned “[Ireland’s] shabby Volunteer convention in 1783, and the General Committee of the Catholics in 1793.” There was no question as to which was the worst – Ireland’s legislature was “beyond all comparison the most shamelessly profligate and abandoned by all sense of virtue, principle, or even common decency.”¹¹⁶ He did not name it or

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 68-69.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 69.

any other as the best, but on the whole, Tone approved of the Dutch Convention and may have viewed it as a potential model for the government of Ireland.

Tone remarked again on the Dutch government in January 1798, after the failure of the Dutch expedition. Several of the Dutch leaders had been arrested or removed from office, and the French had forced them to adopt a constitution, as they had not yet agreed on one for themselves. Despite his insistence that the French would need to liberate rather than conquer Ireland and would not have influence in its government, Tone approved of the French exerting their influence on this occasion. He did not look as benevolently upon the Dutch as before, claiming that if they had had three years of independence and failed to establish their own constitution, the French intervention was warranted. Tone even compared the situation directly to that of a hypothetical future Ireland: “I think I should [approve of French intervention] even in the case of my own country, if she were to shew similar incapacity in like circumstances, which however I am far from apprehending would be the case.”¹¹⁷

Essentially, Tone dodged the important question of to what degree French interference in Ireland would be allowed: in dire circumstances he would pardon it, but he did not imagine that such circumstances would arise. Tone wanted an independent Ireland that could govern itself, and he did not give full consideration to the necessary courses of action if that situation did not immediately arise. The example the Batavian Republic set troubled Tone, and he could not excuse or account for it.

Tone’s travels broadened his political views and plans. They also helped to develop his political character. His writings from the time reflect the pragmatic ways he viewed potential models for Ireland’s eventual government, though they can simultaneously show his unrealistic idealism and failure to respond appropriately to potential problems. These experiences, as well

¹¹⁷ Tone, Diary, 22 January 1798, *Writings of Theobald Wolfe Tone*, 3:193-194.

as his own political views, helped shape him into the practical politician he became. This aspect of Tone's character deserves further attention in historiography, both as it relates to his observations of other governments and to his career as an essayist, diplomat, and negotiator.

IV. Tone as a Politician and Diplomat

A. Tone's Political Skill

Throughout his life, Tone shaped his publicly-expressed political views to the circumstances, defining them differently depending on his audience. This makes it difficult to determine which of the various ideas discussed in his writings he truly believed in and hoped to implement in Ireland in the future and which ones he said to appease certain groups. At different points in his life, Tone declined to express his true thoughts on political situations, either because he knew they would alienate his audiences or because he did not think his goals were achievable at that point in time.

Although this tendency obfuscates Tone's true opinions, it also indicates his skill as a diplomat and a politician. His written works consistently prove that he knew how to present his arguments in order to gain a favorable response from his audiences, whether the response he sought was the French government sending troops to Ireland or his fellow Irish Protestants lending support to the Catholics. The tendency to paint Tone as a romantic and idealistic republican figure, while in some ways not incorrect, obscures his practicality in his political negotiations. In Ireland, his goals were religious unity and reform of the parliamentary system, and by the time he was in France he sought Ireland's independence, but he knew that he needed to argue his points in certain ways to achieve those objectives. It is worth noting, however, that Tone's skill in this area applies primarily to the government officials and middle-class or above figures Tone was negotiating with. His understanding of the peasantry was less complex, and he was less adept at navigating their specific concerns.

B. Tone in Ireland

1. An Argument on Behalf of the Catholics of Ireland

One of Tone's most well-known and important works was a pamphlet he wrote in the summer of 1791, *An Argument on Behalf of the Catholics of Ireland*. The pamphlet, an example of some of Tone's best early political work, was intended to convince his fellow Protestants that it was not only right but necessary to include Catholics in their reform efforts. The primary argument Tone used to justify this was common throughout his works: "The proximate cause of our disgrace is our evil government, the remote one is our own intestine division, which, if once removed, the former will be instantaneously reformed."¹¹⁸ He believed that uniting the people of Ireland in spite of their religious conflict would allow them to solve Ireland's governmental problems at once.

Tone stated within the pamphlet itself that he was addressing the Protestants who led the Irish reform movements with this and the various other arguments he detailed.¹¹⁹ Examining this work therefore allows the reader to understand how even very early in his career, Tone was talented at fitting his points to his target audience in order to answer their concerns and make them far more likely to support his side.

As shown by this essay and many of his other writings, Tone genuinely believed that the Catholics of Ireland deserved to be fairly represented in government. However, this did not prevent him from using Protestant prejudices against Catholics within his pro-Catholic works, and he was not immune to these prejudices himself. In the *Argument* and several of his other works, Tone repeatedly described the Catholic peasantry of Ireland as ignorant. He did also claim that this was not their fault, as it was "the iniquitous and cruel injustice of Protestant

¹¹⁸ Tone, "An argument on behalf of the Catholics of Ireland," 1 August 1791, in *Writings of Theobald Wolfe Tone*, 1:110.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 1:109.

bigotry” that made them that way, but he did not challenge the claim of ignorance itself.¹²⁰

Some of this portrayal was due to Tone’s own deeply held beliefs about Catholicism. In his journals, he remarked negatively even on leading members of the Catholic Committee, such as his close ally John Keogh, whom he called a “papist” who was too devoted to the clergy.¹²¹ Still, he was also aware that he could not challenge typical Protestant views of Catholics too far if he intended to be convincing in his arguments.

In addition to supporting stereotypes about Catholics, Tone’s *Argument* suggested that improving their situation would be best because it would essentially make them less Catholic, removing the traits Protestants saw as negative. He tried to distance even his contemporary Catholics from an association with their religion, saying that they were little different from Protestant peasants or the lower classes from other nations because all peasants were alike in that they had to follow the whims of their wealthy leaders.¹²² Tone then insisted that once they had been educated and granted their rights, Catholics would move beyond their religion and particularly their attachment to the clergy, as the Protestants had. This was presented as a natural result of the “days of illumination” in which he and his compatriots lived.¹²³ As Marianne Elliott has discussed, Tone was strongly influenced by the philosophers of the Enlightenment, and this segment of the *Argument* reflects that.¹²⁴ Tone felt that moving beyond the restrictive superstitions of both Catholicism and Protestantism was a natural and rational progression. He was also aware that he was writing primarily for men with similar educations to his and that they were therefore likely to sympathize with the same ideologies.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 119.

¹²¹ Tone, Diary, 14 and 17 October 1792, *Writings of Theobald Wolfe Tone*, 1:312-313.

¹²² Ibid., 120.

¹²³ Ibid., 121.

¹²⁴ Elliott, *Wolfe Tone*, 352.

Tone's suggestions that the Catholics would quickly move beyond the objectionable aspects of their religion was not only grounded in philosophy. He also based them on the example of the Catholics of France. Tone was very pleased that the Pope had been burned in effigy in Paris and cited this incident in his *Argument*.¹²⁵ To Tone, this was adequate proof that any group of Catholic peasants could be made to reject their devotion to the Pope and attach their allegiance to more appropriate leaders. Nowhere did he suggest that allegiance to the Pope was unobjectionable, as he did not believe it himself and knew that his audience would not either.

The *Argument* also demonstrates Tone's awareness of his readers' potential objections to his claims. It acknowledges the fear that were the Catholics to gain political power, they would attach the nation to France rather than England and again subject it to unjust rule. Tone refuted this idea, objecting to the implication that Ireland would be unable to exist as an independent nation.¹²⁶ He also made a more practical point: an entirely Catholic Parliament able to make decisions regarding Ireland's allegiances would be unlikely to exist within the immediate future, as the systematic inequalities that barred Catholics from power would not disappear the moment they were granted the franchise. Tone also pointed out that there was no evidence that a Catholic Parliament would automatically present a problem in any case.¹²⁷ Tone's consciousness of his audience's fears was evident throughout the *Argument*, and he devoted significant attention to debunking them.

As a result of his own beliefs and his attempts to appeal to his audience, Tone's *Argument* contained several negative implications about Catholicism while attempting to argue in favor of Catholic rights. This is not true throughout the work: one of Tone's ultimate and

¹²⁵ Tone, "Argument on behalf of the Catholics," *Writings of Wolfe Tone*, 1:121.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 122.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 123.

undeniable points was that Protestants who worked for their own rights without including the Catholics were hypocrites, and he did not hesitate to declare this outright:

“We prate and babble, and write books, and publish them, filled with sentiments of freedom and abhorrence of tyranny and lofty praises of the *Rights of Man!* Yet we are content to hold three millions of our fellow creatures and fellow subjects in degradation and infamy and contempt, or, to sum up all in one word, in *slavery!*”¹²⁸

Tone was employed by the Catholic-run Catholic Committee for much of his career in Ireland, often working more closely with them than with the United Irishmen.¹²⁹ He supported their efforts and they were grateful for his work on their behalf. His writings and the *Argument* in particular, despite their prejudiced aspects, were still praised by both Catholics and Protestants and were seen as very helpful to the Catholic cause.¹³⁰ Tone owed his success to his ability to appeal to his audience’s prejudices even as he urged them to reform – prejudices from which he himself was hardly free.

2. The Separatist Letter

Another example of Tone’s adept diplomacy occurred in July of 1791, just before the *Argument* was published and a few months before the official formation of the United Irishmen. A letter Tone wrote in that month again proves his ability to frame his arguments for his audience, and the fallout from this letter years later showed how he could change those

¹²⁸ Ibid., 125.

¹²⁹ Elliott, *Wolfe Tone*, 161.

¹³⁰ Dr. Alexander Henry Haliday to Lord Charlemont, letter, 5 November 1791, *Writings of Theobald Wolfe Tone*, 150-151 discusses the positive reaction to the *Argument* in the Belfast area, where Haliday was a well-known physician.

arguments to protect himself. In 1791, liberals in Belfast were planning a meeting in honor of the anniversary of the fall of the Bastille, and Tone was asked to write a series of resolutions expressing their intentions for the future.¹³¹ While still liberal enough to horrify governmental officials even a few years later, the ideas expressed within were not as radical as the views Tone privately confessed to holding. In the set of resolutions, Tone discussed his commonly-expressed idea that the Irish had “no national government” because they were ruled by England rather than by their own countrymen who would represent their own interests, but claimed to want to solve this problem by reforming the Irish parliament to represent the Irish population more effectively rather than by separating from England. He added that this reform could only be achieved by the absolute union of all of the Irish people, though he did not refer to Catholics or Protestants by name.¹³² However, Tone wrote a private letter to his friend Thomas Russell along with the set of resolutions, and the views discussed in this letter were quite different.

Tone stated at the beginning of his letter that the resolutions expressed his “very true and sincere opinion of the state of this Country *so far as in the present juncture it may be adviseable* [*sic*] to publish it [emphasis Tone’s].”¹³³ This establishes his consciousness of how his political views had to be shaped to be palatable to those he wished to convert and to avoid the risk of imprisonment for treason. He wrote to Russell that he had not written “one Word that looks like a wish for *separation*, tho’ I give it to you & to your friends as my most decided opinion that such an event would be a *regeneration* for this country [emphasis Tone’s].”¹³⁴ Tone was expressing a private wish to separate Ireland from England years before he would advocate it in public writings.

¹³¹ T. W. Moody, R. B. McDowell, and C. J. Woods, “Tone’s Career in Ireland to June 1795,” *Writings of Theobald Wolfe Tone*, 1:xxxiii-xxxiv.

¹³² Theobald Wolfe Tone to Thomas Russell, resolutions, 9 July 1791, *Writings of Theobald Wolfe Tone*, 1:107.

¹³³ Tone to Russell, 9 July 1791, *Writings of Theobald Wolfe Tone*, 1:104.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*

In the same letter, Tone described how he had to alter his beliefs in writing not only to persuade others and escape imprisonment, but to keep from alienating his allies. Referring to the discussion of union in the resolution, Tone wrote, “I have alluded to the Catholics, but so remotely as I hope not to alarm the most cautious Protestant.”¹³⁵ At this point in his career, Tone was primarily working with other Protestants and attempting to persuade them to support various reforms of the parliamentary system to give the franchise and more political power in general to the Dissenters. Although he added later in the letter that he loathed the idea of any reform that would not also assist the disempowered Catholics, he was concerned enough with converting his target audience that he refrained from elaborating on the controversial issue. Within the next few years, Tone would come to work for the Catholic Committee and would discuss the issue of Catholic emancipation publicly and in great detail.

Tone’s writings demonstrate an interest in the Catholic cause from the beginning of his career, but early works like the July 1791 resolutions show that he was willing to place other topics first and avoid the issue when he and his allies deemed it necessary. His shift not long after to being an active Catholic advocate prompts multiple interpretations. Concerned as he always was with shaping his writings to his audience, his alliance with the Catholic Committee may have been an opportunity to express views he had always held. However, it is also possible that Tone’s priorities changed and Catholic emancipation became worth the risks he took in supporting it.

3. The Response to the Letter

Tone himself would claim two years later that the views he expressed in the July 1791 letter to Russell had not changed, though the exact nature of the way he discussed it raises further

¹³⁵ Ibid., 105.

questions. In the summer of 1793, a somewhat inaccurate copy of the letter to Russell fell into the hands of Lord Fitzgibbon, the Earl of Clare, who served as the Attorney-General and Lord Chancellor of Ireland and was a violent opponent to the cause of reform. While not an exact quote of what Tone had written to Russell, the document Fitzgibbon acquired did contain a section about Tone limiting what he wrote publicly and believing that it would be highly beneficial for Ireland and England to separate. He used this evidence to give a speech in the Irish House of Lords denouncing the United Irishmen and claiming that they intended to foment a violent insurrection among the Irish lower classes, despite several of the United Irishmen's public writings – including many by Tone – having repeatedly denied this goal.¹³⁶ The text of Lord Fitzgibbon's speech was printed in *Faulkner's Dublin Journal*, and Tone wrote a letter to the editor of the same journal in response to it. The conservative journal did not publish the letter, but it was intended for a public audience and Tone chose his words accordingly.¹³⁷

In Tone's response, he reiterated that the original letter was never meant to be public at all. "Whatever I said upon it was merely my own individual sentiments in a private letter to a friend, which was never intended to be made public, and much less written with that degree of caution which I should have used had I expected it would ever have become, as I learn it did become, an object of inquiry before the Secret Committee of the Lords," he wrote.¹³⁸ Again, Tone exhibited a consciousness of the way he shaped his own beliefs. He added, "Nevertheless, I am so clear as to the spirit with which it was written, that I would, at this moment, answer with my life for its contents."¹³⁹ Though he insisted that he stood by the beliefs he privately expressed in 1791, his defense for this claim complicates the issue.

¹³⁶ Lord Fitzgibbon, speech in the Irish house of lords, 10 July 1793, *Writings of Theobald Wolfe Tone*, 1:447-451.

¹³⁷ Tone, "To the editor of *Faulkner's Dublin Journal*," 11 July 1793, *Writings of Theobald Wolfe Tone*, 1:452.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 454.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*

Tone then explained that although it was possible that a connection between countries like England and Ireland could be beneficial in an ideal world where both nations were treated equally, Ireland in reality suffered greatly due to the way the English government treated the people. However, in this piece of writing, he did not advocate separation as a solution to the problem. Instead, he wrote that were both nations to begin again, he would not want Ireland connected to England, but as it was, he did not want to break the current connection but rather to make it equal by means of parliamentary reform.¹⁴⁰ In essence, he defended the ideals of the cause of separation but did not quite associate himself with it.

Though Tone claimed to be standing by the 1791 letter in this, the text of the letter implies otherwise. In addition to the statement about how separation would regenerate Ireland, Tone's original letter said, "My unalterable opinion is that the Bane of Irish prosperity in [*sic*] the influence of England. I believe that influence will ever be exerted while the connexion [*sic*] between the Countries continues."¹⁴¹ This does not allow for the possibility of moderate parliamentary reform alleviating the problems caused by the connection with England, as England's poisonous influence would continue while the two countries were joined regardless. Tone did hope for parliamentary reform, but writings such as this suggest that it was because he felt that it would be an improvement to the current situation, not a solution to all of Ireland's problems. He devoted himself to separation and republicanism later in his career when the hope of French assistance made them plausible, but he could not have maintained that position earlier in the 1790s. When considered in this light, his defense to *Faulkner's Dublin Journal* reads more as another attempt to avoid endangering his position with the government than a true defense and expression of his political beliefs.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 454-456.

¹⁴¹ Tone to Russell, 9 July 1791, *Writings of Theobald Wolfe Tone* 1:104.

4. Early Thoughts on the French Revolution

Tone's piece intended for *Faulkner's Dublin Journal* contains another more subtle example of the ways he shaped his political views for various audiences. When defending his statement in the letter, he first noted that the letter was written in 1791 and he did not work for the Catholic Committee until 1792, thus absolving them of any connection with the cause of separation. He then added that "The date of the letter will likewise account for anything contained in it favourable to the French revolution."¹⁴² Tone implied that he initially supported the cause of the French Revolution but came to look on it negatively as it became more radical and did not support it in 1793. Tone's feelings on the actions taken at various points in the French Revolution were complex, but this is a definite contradiction with his other writings.

Upon learning at the end of January 1793 that Louis XVI had been beheaded, Tone's succinct comment in his journal was, "I am sorry it was necessary."¹⁴³ This was probably one of the events that prompted him to deny connection with the French Revolution in the *Faulkner's Dublin Journal* piece, but privately he agreed that it had been the correct course of action even if he did not relish it. Tone also discussed the death of Louis XVI in the March 1793 pamphlet he wrote as an anonymous manufacturer, where he claimed that the execution of the king did not justify war with France and was a French matter that should be resolved internally. He also pointed out that the English themselves had beheaded Charles I.¹⁴⁴ He did not completely condemn the French even then. The anonymous nature of his essay meant he still did not associate any hint of support for the execution with his own name. Tone was very aware of his

¹⁴² Tone, "To the editor of *Faulkner's Dublin Journal*," 11 July 1793, *Writings of Theobald Wolfe Tone*, 1:454.

¹⁴³ Tone, Diary, 26-31 January 1793, *Writings of Theobald Wolfe Tone*, 1:403.

¹⁴⁴ Tone, "To the manufacturers of Dublin, by A Liberty Weaver," March 1793, *Writings of Theobald Wolfe Tone*, 1:420.

public political identity. Regardless of how he presented himself at this point, his suggestion that he had given up on the French was untrue, as he would be discussing the potential of a French invasion of Ireland with William Jackson within a year. His views on the violent actions of the later French Revolution and the Terror continued to develop, but he generally tried to justify them or avoided discussing them at all rather than outright rejecting them.

C. Tone in France

1. Verbal Negotiations

Tone discussed his various negotiations with French governmental officials extensively in the journals he kept in the mid-1790s. These revealed how he consciously framed his views to suit his audience, though his reasoning was not always clear. Among the most notable is a conversation Tone had on 11 March 1796 with Charles Delacroix, the French Minister of Foreign Affairs. When discussing the government that would be established in Ireland after the success of the French expedition, Delacroix suggested selecting members of the army to act as a provisional government until something more permanent could be established. Tone replied that while it might be necessary to do so, he would not have preferred a military government if any other options were available.¹⁴⁵

However, Tone admitted in his journal that “In this I lied a little, for my wishes are in favor of a very strong or, in other words, a military government in the outset.” He went on to explain that although power could be abused in such a government, he felt that the benefits outweighed the risks, and he was pleased that Delacroix had suggested it.¹⁴⁶ Tone did not elaborate on his precise reason for objecting to a plan he supported, but he seemed to believe that

¹⁴⁵ Tone, *Diary*, 11 March 1796, *Writings of Theobald Wolfe Tone*, 2:105.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

it would strengthen his cause with Delacroix in some fashion. He likely wanted to establish a strong temporary Irish government, but did not want the French to remain too closely involved with it. Several of his writings were concerned with assuring the Irish people that the French would not come to conquer them, as well as asking the French to make the same promise themselves.

Tone's journals for the year 1796 contain many similar discussions of his conversations with Delacroix and various other French ministers. They demonstrate the political needs he expressed in those meetings and how he attempted to make them align with those of the French, sometimes more successfully than others. He anticipated and answered French concerns, as when he promised Lazare Carnot, a former member of the Committee of Public Safety who came to serve the Directory, that Ireland would not replicate America's ingratitude to France.¹⁴⁷ On the same occasion, he emphasized that Ireland took on a much greater risk than France in pursuing a rebellion.¹⁴⁸ Tone was ready to counter possible objections to his plan.

The journals also reflect Tone's acute awareness of the requirements of his situation. His plan remained a relevant option for France only so long as they were at war with England. On hearing rumors of an armistice between the two nations in March 1796, Tone sought out Madgett and was relieved to find they were false, noting in his journal that "A peace would ruin all."¹⁴⁹ The French ministers he spoke to had a variety of other international political concerns to consider and often made plans Tone disagreed with or prioritized their goals in different ways, as did the generals he hoped would lead the troops.

Tone thought it would be beneficial to the cause to have a famous French general the people of Ireland would recognize at the head of the rebellion and made several attempts at

¹⁴⁷ Tone, Diary, 26 February 1796, *Writings of Theobald Wolfe Tone*, 2:86.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 87.

¹⁴⁹ Tone, Diary, 8 March 1796, *Writings of Theobald Wolfe Tone*, 2:103.

securing one. After suggesting the Marquis de Beurnonville in March 1796, Tone was told by Clarke that Beurnonville was already assigned to lead 60,000 men in Holland and was unlikely to be tempted by a smaller command in Ireland. Tone insisted that the Irish cause would be more glorious and more lucrative, repeating the promise that Ireland would remember and reward the French.¹⁵⁰ He used the same strategy a few months later while trying to acquire Jean-Charles Pichegru, insisting that the fame and honor he would receive in liberating Ireland was “of no ordinary magnitude” and that he could “rely on the gratitude of [Tone’s] country in its fullest extent.”¹⁵¹ Tone did not secure Beurnonville or Pichegru, so this was not one of his more successful strategies, but it did show his awareness that the French soldiers and ministers had many concerns and he had to offer something in return to entice them to support Ireland’s cause.

2. Writings in France

During his time in France, Tone produced several documents intended to sway the French government to his cause. The first and most important of these were the two memorials that he wrote not long after his arrival in Paris describing Ireland’s situation. Tone’s first memorial began by emphasizing the conflict between England and France, describing the “irreconcilable opposition of interests between the two nations.”¹⁵² The memorial then discussed the various supplies and military resources England drew from Ireland.¹⁵³ Tone was once again trying to draw French attention to the Irish cause by pointing out the benefits to them. He also used the memorial to flatter the French, attributing the fact that the people of Ireland were now ready for religious union and independence to the “unbounded liberty of conscience” they had heard of in

¹⁵⁰ Tone, Diary, 27 March 1796, *Writings of Theobald Wolfe Tone*, 2:130.

¹⁵¹ Tone, Diary, 1 May 1796, *Writings of Theobald Wolfe Tone*, 2:174.

¹⁵² Tone, “First memorial to the French government on the present state of Ireland,” 22 February 1796, *Writings of Theobald Wolfe Tone*, 2:61.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, 62.

France.¹⁵⁴ Tone explained the state of Ireland in a manner intended to please the French and appeal to their interests.

The second memorial used similar techniques: Tone pointed out that a significant proportion of the British navy was Irish and that promoting Irish independence would severely damage Britain's formidable naval power, even noting that he "supplicate[d] the attention of the French Government to this point, which [was] in [his] judgment of the very highest importance."¹⁵⁵ However, Tone was not only concerned with French interests. The second memorial was mostly about what needed to be done in Ireland once the French had landed, and Tone was willing to make certain stipulations to ensure Ireland became truly independent. Tone wrote several provisions that would need to be published as a manifesto when the French landed in Ireland, and the first of these was "an absolute disavowal of all idea of conquest and a statement that the French come as friends and brothers with no other view than to assist the people in throwing off the yoke of England."¹⁵⁶ Despite the need to appeal to French interests, Tone's goal was an independent Irish republic, and he would not compromise on that. Even this had some notes of flattery: Tone noted later in the memorial that he and the people of Ireland would trust the French to allow their independence because of their "singular moderation with regard to Holland."¹⁵⁷ The memorial concluded with the same techniques Tone used to try to attract generals: he emphasized the honor and glory inherent in helping to free a nation and make another new republic.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 64.

¹⁵⁵ Tone, "Second memorial to the French government on the present state of Ireland," 29 February 1796, *Writings of Theobald Wolfe Tone*, 2:94.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 90.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 91.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 97.

Tone also produced a few other documents intended to promote Irish interests to the French government. These again proved what compromises Tone was and wasn't willing to make and what techniques he was willing to consider. He devoted an entire memorandum to explaining to Clarke why sending a group of lower-class men into Ireland to incite guerilla warfare before the rebellion began, a practice known as *chouannerie*, was a poor plan. Clarke had suggested this strategy to Tone, but Tone was adamant that it would only cause uprisings that would be quickly defeated, destroy much of their support, and harm the Irish more than the English.¹⁵⁹ He would not risk the welfare of the Irish cause to that degree even if it would please the French.

Tone also composed a memorandum laying out the precise numbers of troops in Ireland and strategies for their landing.¹⁶⁰ This essay served to answer French questions, as men like Hoche and Carnot had already expressed and would continue to express concerns about the precise amount of support they were likely to find on landing in Ireland.¹⁶¹ On the whole, Tone's public writings in France served to flatter the French and assuage their concerns, but never to the point of compromising the goals Tone had come to France to pursue. He was as skilled in the diplomatic arena in writing as he was in his direct discussions with the French government.

D. Tone's Political Weaknesses

¹⁵⁹ Tone, "Memorandum to General Henri Jacques Guillaume Clarke on the encouragement of *chouannerie* in Ireland," 4 April 1796, *Writings of Theobald Wolfe Tone*, 2:144-145. See Tone, Diary, 2 April 1796, *Writings of Theobald Wolfe Tone*, 2:139-141 for Tone's discussion of Clarke's suggestion of *chouannerie*, which lists similar objections to the memorandum.

¹⁶⁰ Tone, "Memorandum on the number and position of the troops in Ireland," 26 April 1796, *Writings of Theobald Wolfe Ton*, 2:164-169.

¹⁶¹ Carnot raising this question is recorded in Tone, Diary, 24 February 1796, *Writings of Theobald Wolfe Tone*, 2:77, while Tone's discussion with Hoche on the topic is in Tone, Diary, 13 July 1796, *Writings of Theobald Wolfe Tone*, 2:233.

Tone's most obvious flaw as a politician was the idealism that occasionally veered into naïveté, blinding him to the reality of Ireland's situation. Though the blend of cunning and naïveté in his personality may seem contradictory, his writings and political negotiations nevertheless contain both qualities. Tone was very skilled at persuading his audiences to help him accomplish his goals, but the rhetoric he used to do so indicated that he did not fully understand the situations he was describing. He held beliefs about the state of Ireland that did not reflect the truth and implied that a revolution would be much easier than was eventually revealed to be the case. His failure to evaluate these beliefs on a more realistic level meant that neither he nor the French government understood Ireland's situation.

On some occasions, it is difficult to be certain whether he believed the optimistic statements he was making or only intended them to convince his audience to support him. Regardless, overstating his cause was far from beneficial in the long run, as when the French did land in Ireland in 1798, they found the situation to be very different from what Tone had described. The 1798 expedition was small, belated, and uncoordinated, so Tone's exaggerations are hardly to blame for the failure of the rebellion, but they were ultimately more harmful than helpful and cannot be seen as successful political decisions on his part.

One of Tone's most frequent misstatements relates to his restrictive view of the Irish peasantry. He continually insisted that the peasants of Ireland were all warlike and opposed to English rule and would all rise in rebellion the moment that French troops landed on Irish shores. Though he believed they deserved more rights and religious freedom, Tone failed to imagine the peasantry complexly or consider the idea that they might have other motivations and concerns than England's immediate destruction by their hands.

Tone's portrayal of the peasants of Ireland as eager and violent began early in his career. In one of his first political pamphlets, in which he argued that Ireland should not be obligated to join the war effort if England went to war with Spain, he claimed that the Irish people, his "countrymen," were "ever impatient of peace and prompt for battle," but the "lords and gentlemen" whom he was addressing – the Irish parliament, in the context implicitly of a different class than the common "countrymen" – would consider the matter more deeply and determine that war was not the correct course of action.¹⁶² While Tone would grow more disdainful of such "lords and gentlemen" as he grew older and further engaged with the reform movement, his view of the peasantry did not consequently improve. It was during his French negotiations that this began to have real political consequences.

The memorials Tone wrote shortly after arriving in Paris continued this trend. These insisted that the uneducated peasants were ideal soldiers who would undoubtedly rise in support if the French arrived in Ireland and would probably do so even if they did not. In the first memorial, Tone described several features of the Catholic peasantry that he claimed made them ideal soldiers: the "wretchedness and misery" they had experienced made them "bold," they were "used to every species of hardship," they required few resources and could "live on little," and they were "prepared for any change, for they [felt] that no change [could] make their situation worse."¹⁶³ He attempted to portray their lack of experience and poor quality of life as advantages, though such qualities seem unlikely to improve their skill in combat, and he spun their misery into adaptability.

¹⁶² Tone, *Spanish War! An Enquiry How Far Ireland is Bound, of Right, to Embark in the Impending Contest on the Side of Great Britain*, 30 June 1790, *Writings of Theobald Wolfe Tone*, 1:52.

¹⁶³ Tone, "First memorial on the present state of Ireland, delivered to the French government," February 1796, *Writings of Theobald Wolfe Tone*, 2:66.

Tone's second memorial, which discussed military and government plans in more detail, claimed that while the Irish militia would only join the rebellion "if 'they saw a reasonable prospect of support'" based on the number of French troops sent, the ordinary people of the lower classes "would flock to the Republican standard in such numbers as to embarrass the general" for even the smallest possible delegation.¹⁶⁴ The members of the militia could judge the odds of the rebellion's success by the number of men involved, but the peasants were incapable of such evaluations.

Tone's portraits of the Irish peasantry's military capabilities were not entirely biased and naïve. Despite his general claims that they were ready to rise up at a moment's notice, he did acknowledge that they would not do so blindly with no hope of success – or at least that not all of them would. In negotiations with Madgett, Tone claimed that one of the reasons the French had to be sent was that if they were not, only a few Irish peasants would rebel against the government and they would be defeated and killed, a situation he was desperate to avoid.¹⁶⁵ Tone's second memorial also acknowledged that the people's support would depend on the French making it clear that they came to Ireland to liberate and not conquer it.¹⁶⁶

Still, Tone repeatedly implied or stated outright that the French would find much more support in Ireland than they did in reality when they landed in 1798, which caused the French leaders immense frustration when General Humbert landed in Connacht and the Irish did not flock as one to his side.¹⁶⁷ Tone may have overstated the situation in order to gain French support he feared he would not have otherwise. Several of the French officials and military

¹⁶⁴ Tone, "Second memorial on the present state of Ireland, delivered to the French government," February-March 1796, *Writings of Theobald Wolfe Tone*, 2:89-90. "They saw a reasonable prospect of support" is marked with quotation marks in the original, but the source of the quote or other reasoning behind this is unclear.

¹⁶⁵ Tone, Diary, 17 February 1796, *Writings of Theobald Wolfe Tone*, 2:58.

¹⁶⁶ Tone, "Second memorial on the present state of Ireland, delivered to the French government," February-March 1796, *Writings of Theobald Wolfe Tone*, 2:90.

¹⁶⁷ Elliott, *Partners in Revolution*, 116-119.

leaders he spoke to, such as Hoche, were reluctant to commit large numbers of men to Ireland without the assurance that they would find many allies there.¹⁶⁸ Still, when the arguments he made were not supported in reality, it is difficult to see Tone's exaggeration as a good political move in the end.

Comparing Tone's private and public writings also leads to the conclusion that Tone held genuinely unrealistic beliefs regarding the Irish peasantry and was not merely using claims of their military skill to persuade the French. His journal entries reflect his stereotyped views of the common people of Ireland, whom he painted as violent and ignorant, yet courageous. On one characteristic occasion during his time in France in 1796, when sent to offer Irish prisoners of war the opportunity to join the fleet meant to travel to Ireland, Tone described the men in his journal as drunken and hotheaded and claimed that this accurately represented the Irish "national character."¹⁶⁹ At other points, such as when he examined a group of French soldiers and considered the potential for the Irish army, he associated bravery with this "Irish character."¹⁷⁰ These private remarks, which had no political purposes, suggest that Tone did believe the Irish peasants to be brave and violent and therefore well-suited to military life, if not to governmental positions.

Tone also repeated the idea that the peasants would undoubtedly rise to join any revolutionary force in his journal as he waited for the unsuccessful Dutch expedition in 1797.¹⁷¹ He could have been using his unlikely suggestions about the Irish peasantry to persuade the French that they would find military support if they traveled to Ireland and may have been doing

¹⁶⁸ Tone, Diary, 12 July 1796, *Writings of Theobald Wolfe Tone*, 2:233.

¹⁶⁹ Tone, Diary, 10 November 1796, *Writings of Theobald Wolfe Tone*, 2:371.

¹⁷⁰ Tone, Diary, 30 March 1796, *Writings of Theobald Wolfe Tone*, 2:136.

¹⁷¹ Tone, Diary, 5 August 1797, *Writings of Theobald Wolfe Tone*, 3:118.

so to some degree, but his other writing on the subject shows that he held these naïve beliefs in private as well.

Another misstatement Tone was prone to making was his insistence that religion mattered little in his modern Ireland. His *Argument on Behalf of the Catholics* went so far as to state outright that “religion has at this day little influence on politics.”¹⁷² He was quick to downplay the influence of religion in his negotiations with the French as well, as when he claimed in a set of instructions intended for a man who was to be sent to Ireland as a spy that the Defenders, a lower-class Catholic movement that came into frequent conflict with the Protestant Peep-o-Day Boys, was entirely motivated by poor economic conditions and not by religion at all.¹⁷³ This tendency also created French expectations that were never to be fulfilled. Tone had prepared them to find distinctly irreligious peasants when they landed in Ireland, but instead they were greeted by sincere Catholics who prayed fervently for their success. One French officer from Humbert’s expedition, Captain Jobit, called them fanatics in his writings and described them and their practices as strange and outdated.¹⁷⁴ Once again, Tone’s misstatements were more harmful to his cause than helpful.

Tone was eager to have the French sent to Ireland and was generally quite successful in his political and rhetorical strategies, but his idealism, occasional naïveté, and biased views of the Irish lower class led him to make promises that he could not fulfill. While these promises could have been more techniques to secure French support, they made matters worse when the French arrived in Ireland and found their expectations unfulfilled. Tone did not always successfully balance the need to convince the French with the need to prepare them for what they were likely to find when they joined the rebellion. His journals also demonstrate that much of

¹⁷² Tone, “Argument on behalf of the Catholics,” *Writings of Wolfe Tone*, 1:125.

¹⁷³ Tone, “Observations on Instructions Intended for Eugene Ahearn,” 22 April 1796, *Writings of Wolfe Tone*, 2:159.

¹⁷⁴ Quoted in John Cooney, *Humbert’s Expedition – A Lost Cause?* (Ballina: “Western People” Printing, 1989), 10.

the idealism was real and not simply a rhetorical technique. Though Tone should be studied as a politician, this does not mean he should be viewed as a perfect one.

V. Conclusion

Thus far, the historiography of Wolfe Tone has focused on portraying him in alignment with various symbolic ideas or political perspectives. Tone's actual writings defy placing him wholly in any of these various categories. He must instead be understood as a pragmatic politician constructing his arguments to please his audiences and further his country's goals above all else, as well as a man caught between practicality and desperate idealism. The political aspects of Tone's character have been neglected or even deliberately downplayed, as in the works of Marianne Elliott. Future historians should examine them more closely in order to better understand both Tone himself and the causes he espoused.

Tone's early writings in Ireland were not simply the works of a man defending his beliefs, but carefully crafted efforts to persuade his audiences without alienating them or risking his own safety. In France, he determined which aspects of his vision for Ireland were necessary and safe to present to the Directory and which were not. His actions were deliberate and, despite his missteps, very often successful, even when he acted without the direct influence of the United Irishmen. The failures of the 1798 rebellion and the earlier expeditions were largely beyond his control, though his occasional naïveté did not help his cause.

Tone was a martyr, a revolutionary, and a legend, but above all, he was a man. Historical figures, even beloved martyrs and founding fathers, cannot be simply and perfectly aligned with useful causes. They must be imagined as complex and dynamic people reacting to the world around them. In Tone's case, he saw the world as a political and diplomatic arena. This does not mean that his accomplishments cannot be admired or that his losses cannot be regretted, only that they should be seen for the calculated moves that they were. Ireland's independence, had Tone and his allies achieved it, would have been built on careful compromise and negotiation.

Romantic ideas of unity and the people's rights, though important parts of Tone's philosophy, were not the only tools he had at hand. Tone himself acknowledged his political decisions in his journals in ways that historians have not done thus far. While they can be hated or admired, Tone and other men and women of the past can never be reduced to static symbols.

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