

Presence and absence of Wolfe Tone during the centenary commemoration of the 1798 rebellion

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In the preface to *The Sites of Memory*, Pierre Nora points out the difference between memory and history. Memory 'is rooted in the concrete space, the gesture, the image and the object', whereas history is interested in the evolution of facts and the links between them. Memory is affective, magical. History is the reconstruction of the past; it needs analysis, objectivity. 'Memory is an absolute while history knows only the relative'. History destroys spontaneous, social, collective memory and transforms it variously into 'memory-archives', 'memory duty' and 'memory-distance'. The first type of memory wants to make a record of everything; 'it is the voluntary and organised secretion of a lost memory'. The second 'gives every group the obligation to redefine its identity by the revitalisation of its own history'. Pierre Nora notes that it was not by chance that memory appeared in philosophy (Bergson), psychoanalysis (Freud) and literature (Proust) at the end of the nineteenth century: when there is little collective memory each individual has the obligation to look for his own identity. The third type of memory stresses the distance between the past and the present, whereas collective memory perceives the past as if it were not past and could be easily resurrected.¹

Having highlighted the difference between collective memory and the kind of memory created by history, Nora defines the 'sites of memory' as belonging to collective memory and historical memory, to the abstract as well as the concrete. Their *raison d'être* is 'to stop time', 'to immortalise death'. They can take the form of the revolutionary calendar, history books, memoirs written by novelists, poets or statesmen, graveyards, anniversaries, pilgrimages, speeches, funeral orations. Pierre Nora's definition of the 'sites of memory' may be applied to the first commemoration of the 1798 Rebellion, since the symbolisation of the past reality was as important as the reality itself, if not more so.

Pascal Ory, writing about the centenary of the French Revolution, presents a typology of the ways and means of commemorating an event, namely 'the historiographical, the monumental and the ceremonial ones'.² All three were used in

¹ Pierre Nora, 'Between Memory and History' in L. Gallimard (ed.), *The Sites of Memory* (Paris, 1984), pp. xix, xxv, xxvi, xxviii, xxix, xxxii. (The translations from French are mine.)

² Pascal Ory, 'The Centenary of the French Revolution' in Gallimard (ed.), *The Sites of Memory*, p. 524.

1898. Marcus Bourke writes: 'At a time when Irish history was rarely taught in the schools then controlled by the British, the '98 centenary movement took the place of a popular twelve-month course in this neglected subject for adults and young people alike'.³ Local demonstrations reminded people of their heritage. Visits were arranged to historic sites, to battlefields, '98 literature about the rebellion was distributed. The commemoration was presented by the various organisers as an obligation on the Irish people, to know an important moment of their past, to grasp the implications of the failure of the insurrection and its current significance. The concrete was mingled with the abstract, objective knowledge with the glorification and embellishment of the event. 'From one end of the country to the other, '98 literature had been distributed, vivid descriptions given of the various incidents of the rebellion in which the patriotic angle was always emphasised and the leaders eulogised.'⁴ No allusion was made to the sectarian violence, as this was incompatible with the commemoration.

The second way of commemorating the rebellion was also important. National monuments were erected or planned. On 1 November 1898, Fr Kavanagh⁵ laid the foundation stone of the Wexford 1798 monument, which was to be Sheppard's famous Wexford Pikeman. A memorial to General Humbert was unveiled at Ballina after the commemoration in June 1899. John O'Leary unveiled a statue to his friend, the Fenian Charles Kickham, in his native Wexford on 27 November 1898. He also laid the foundation stone of a Wolfe Tone monument at the entrance to St Stephen's Green, on 15 August 1898, which was declared a municipal holiday.

The ceremonial way of commemorating the rebellion culminated during the Wolfe Tone demonstration, 'the high point of the centenary celebrations'. It was 'the biggest thing of its kind seen in Dublin for years. Some thirty thousand people lined the streets to watch a procession organised by Fred Allan that took over two hours to pass from the General Post Office to the site of the projected memorial at the top of Grafton Street'.⁶

These preliminary considerations on the specificity of commemorative activity lead me to the theme of my chapter: the presence and absence of Wolfe Tone in 1898.

Tone's persona was at the centre of the commemoration and his call for unity was the slogan of the year. The commemoration brought about a resurgence and a consolidation of all hues of nationalism. On 5 January 1897, the council of the Young Ireland League 'decided to call a public meeting of nationalists in the City Hall, Dublin, on 4 March, Emmet's birthday'. The Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB) played a great part in that project and O'Leary, who had returned from exile

3 Marcus Bourke, *John O'Leary* (Tralee, 1967), p. 219. 4 Leon Ó'Broin, *Revolutionary Underground* (Dublin, 1976), p. 89. 5 Fr Patrick Kavanagh (1834-1916) was a writer of prose and verse, a lecturer and a preacher. His *Popular History of the Insurrection of 1798* went through many editions. In his youth he knew many of the actors therein and heard authentic details. 6 Ó Broin, p. 90. 'On the last night of 1897 there were torchlight processions in Dublin, Cork, Belfast and Limerick to inaugurate the centenary'. *Ibid.*, p. 86.

in January 1885, was a major figure at that time. He was 'in on the secret from the start', writes Marcus Bourke, 'if indeed his was not the master mind'. O'Leary chaired the City Hall meeting on 4 March 1897, which was to discuss the plans for the celebration of the rising. He was put at the helm of the '98 centenary provisional committee and 'made a magnanimous appeal for support from all parties and guaranteed that the new body would be non-political and non-sectarian'.⁷ So, in spite of the fact that the initiative came from an old Fenian, the differences of opinion about nationhood and the means to attain it seemed to be forgotten. At an all-party centenary dinner, John O'Leary, John Redmond, the future leader of the re-united Irish Parliamentary Party, Mark Ryan of the Irish National Brotherhood (INB), W.B. Yeats and Maud Gonne sat together.

All over the country, '98 clubs were formed. At the suggestion of the poetess Alice Milligan, the Dublin '98 Centenary Organisation agreed to erect a national memorial to Wolfe Tone and the United Irishmen. There was a gathering in Bodenstown churchyard on 19 June and on the following day the Wolfe Tone memorial fund was inaugurated. The national commemoration was planned for July but was changed to coincide with the planned laying of the foundation stone of a Wolfe Tone monument. 'The stone, hewn from McArt's fort on the Cave Hill overlooking Belfast, was laid in a great public demonstration on 15 August with a trowel sent from America by Grace Maxwell, Tone's granddaughter'.⁸ The Tone cult was at its climax.

The perception of Tone at the end of the nineteenth century was moulded by the works of the Young Irelanders. They were the first to tackle Tone's inheritance. They studied his writings, to understand him and to follow him. In a sense, the Young Irelanders were more revolutionaries than historians since their studies were supposed to lead to action. Tone's idea of uniting all of the Irish people inspired Thomas Davis who considered himself Tone's heir, and who dreamed of reconciling Irishmen, of uniting green and orange, a dream that seemed to be forgotten in 1898. Thomas Davis constructed the kind of memory defined by Pierre Nora as a memory based on facts that have to be learned and understood. The *Nation* was intended to educate the Irish, to teach them their past. Thanks to the Young Irelanders, Tone's *Life*, which was published by his son during the campaign for Catholic Emancipation, became known. However Davis' memory was not only historical, it was affective, concrete, subjective, full of the veneration he felt for Tone. Though his conception of unity was close to Tone's, his ideas on a spiritual nationality, on the Irish language as a vehicle for the Gaelic tradition, were marked by the Romantic nationalism of his time and were alien to Tone:

A people without a language of its own is only half a nation. A nation should guard its language more than its territories – 'tis a surer barrier, and more important frontier, than fortress or river.

7 Bourke, *O'Leary*, p. 216. 8 Marianne Elliot, *Wolfe Tone, Prophet of Irish Independence* (New Haven and London, 1989), p. 415.

If we live influenced by wind and sun, sun and tree, and not by the passions and deeds of the past, we are a thriftless and hopeless people.

If a union of all Irish-born men ever be accomplished, Ireland will have the greatest and most varied materials for an industrious nationality, and for a tolerant and flexible character in literature, manners, religion, and life, of any nation on earth.⁹

Thomas Davis moulded an image of Tone as founder of Irish nationalism, which became a part of the collective Irish memory. He formed the people according to his own vision of the world and, at the same time, responded to their need to embellish the past. In 1895, according to W.B. Yeats, Davis' book *The Spirit of the Nation*, first published in 1843, was 'on the counter of every country stationer' and his famous ballad, 'Tone's Grave', became part of popular culture.¹⁰

Among the Young Irelanders, John Mitchel, the Ulster Presbyterian descendant of the Hasletts, Tone's Belfast colleagues, was very much inspired by Tone's commitment to arms against England and his *History of Ireland* was influenced by Tone's *Life*. Proclaiming his hatred of English oppression, Mitchel linked his time to the Rebellion of 1798 and looked to the future. But, by his advocacy of the land for the people, he was quite far from Tone's tradition.

Mitchel's interpretation of Tone greatly influenced the Fenians. The Tone cult which had started with the Young Irelanders, continued with the Fenians and nurtured their nationalism. The Fenians were inspired by Tone's plea in favour of physical force and republicanism associated with political independence. But was Fenian republicanism close to Tone's republicanism? For the Fenians, as stressed in the proclamation issued by the provisional government in 1867, the aim of the rising was the establishment of a republic based on universal suffrage and the complete separation of church and state. Contemporary historians, such as Tom Dunne, Marianne Elliott and Thomas Bartlett, throw a new light on Tone's republicanism and separatism and allow us to differentiate his political views from those of the Fenians. According to Tom Dunne, Tone was not a separatist from 'his earliest youth' but came to separation 'out of alienation and despair'.¹¹ He represents at its highest the colonial nationalist tradition. Marianne Elliot suggested that Tone was a 'republican in the Irish nationalist and separatist sense of the word', a republican 'in its eighteenth-century reading', in that he wanted to 'reform the existing system, not to overthrow it', to create 'a meritocracy, not a democracy, and an equality of opportunity, not of property'.¹² Thomas Bartlett examined republican and

9 Arthur Griffith (ed.), *Thomas Davis: the Thinker and Teacher* (Dublin, 1916), pp. 10, 12, 54.
 10 *Uncollected Prose by W.B. Yeats* (London, 1970-5), p. 383, quoted in Elliot, *Wolfe Tone*, p. 413, p. 475, n 17. 'In Bodenstown Churchyard there is a green grave, And freely around it let winter winds rave - Far better they sent him - the ruin and gloom - TILL IRELAND, A NATION, CAN BUILD HIM A TOMB.' *The Poems of Thomas Davis* (Dublin, 1853), pp. 162-3.
 11 Tom Dunne, *Theobald Wolfe Tone, Colonial Outsider* (Cork, 1984), pp. 23, 43. 12 Elliot, *Wolfe Tone*, p. 415.

separatist thought in the eighteenth century to provide a context for Tone's political philosophy. Based on the ideas of Machiavelli, Paine, Milton and Montesquieu, republicanism was not a programme. But everybody agreed, if not on the form of government, at least on the moral aspect of republicanism. Bartlett, like Elliot, puts Tone in that tradition: 'Tone's language was unmistakably republican, filled with notions of resistance to tyrants, opposition to hereditary aristocracies and replete with aspirations to end corruption and install virtue'.¹³ According to Bartlett, 'Tone undoubtedly harboured separatist thoughts from an early date', but 'remained a reluctant separatist'. He realised that 'the republicanism which he sought could be achieved only through breaking the link' and when 'unionist sentiment spread in the 1790s' he 'welcomed the international crisis offered by the French Revolution for it offered that 'emergency' (Tone) or *occasione* (Machiavelli) which republicans everywhere had long seen as necessary to the fulfilment of their plans'.¹⁴ Republicanism and independence were not identical at the end of the eighteenth century.¹⁵

How was the Tone cult affected by the late nineteenth-century Irish renaissance? The revival of the Gaelic past, which was a mythical, idealised reconstruction of that past, a reconstructed memory, was far from Tone's ideology. For the IRB, at its lowest point at the end of the century, the Gaelic revival offered an opportunity to play a part in Irish life. The IRB infiltrated the Gaelic Athletic Association, the Gaelic League and they in turn were influenced by the popular enthusiasm for Irish culture.¹⁶ John O'Leary, for instance, was, in the words of John Devoy, 'saturated with the literature of Young Ireland' and influenced by the writings of Mitchel and especially Thomas Davis, who, in a way, had given an Irish colour to the Tone cult.¹⁷ O'Leary took a prominent part in the Irish cultural renaissance. He was one of the earliest patrons of the GAA, presided over the meeting in the Rotunda on 18 September 1891 when the Young Ireland League was formed and was president of the National Literary Society of Ireland. But, for him, as for many Fenians, the study of the Irish language, literature and music was subordinate to politics. An ideology of returning to the Gaelic past became linked with

13 Thomas Bartlett, 'The Burden of the Present. Theobald Wolfe Tone, Republican and Separatist' in David Dickson, Dáire Keogh and Kevin Whelan (eds), *The United Irishmen* (Dublin, 1993), p. 6. **14** *Ibid.*, pp. 14–15. **15** 'The idea that Ireland could exist on her own – both *independent* and *separate* from England – seems to have been largely unthinkable. The independence that was sometimes demanded from the mid-fifteenth to the late eighteenth century was purely legislative and in no way aimed at denying royal authority over Ireland'. (*Ibid.*, p. 8). **16** Some Fenians were interested in the Gaelic past. John O'Mahony had translated Keating's *History of Ireland*. He gave the revolutionary movement a name that had been carried by the warriors of the legends of ancient Ireland. Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa was a native Irish speaker. John Devoy who learned Irish at the age of nine asserted that if the 1867 rising had been successful the Fenians would have restored the language. **17** Bourke, *John O'Leary*, p. 16.

an ideology of continuity with the rebellious past of 1798, 1848, 1867, which sought to overthrow the English yoke.

A man like James Connolly perceived the Gaelic revival in his own way. For him the suppression of the Irish language and its replacement by English was an illustration of British imperialism. The restoration of Irish was linked with the fight for independence and could only be achieved by a socialist revolution: 'You cannot teach starving men Gaelic'. On his return to Ireland in 1896, he founded the Irish Socialist Republican Party (ISRP) and organised educational meetings. The commemoration was an opportunity for the ISRP to launch a spectacular campaign. 'A Rank and File '98 Club' was founded, to teach the people the aims of the United Irishmen. Before the commemoration, Connolly gave lectures on 'socialism and the '98 celebrations'. He made the oration during the visit to Wolfe Tone's grave, organised by the 'Rank and File Committee'. On Sunday, 14 August, he spoke on 'Wolfe Tone and the Irish Social Revolution' and on the day of the commemoration the inaugural number of the newspaper the *Workers' Republic* was sold. In it, Connolly claimed that 'the Irish socialist party alone is in line with the thought of this revolutionary apostle of the United Irishmen'. He was close to Tone when he wrote about burying the hatreds between Catholics and Protestants but far from him when he focused on a change in class relations. Connolly's sense of unity, which was rare at the time, was not only national but social and was based on 'a union between Protestant and Catholic masses'. He saw Tone as a 'rebel' who wanted to liberate Ireland and was very critical of the Home Rule leaders, claiming that they had distorted Tone's principles and that they had no right to take part in the commemoration:

He was crucified in life, now he is idolised in death, and the men who push forward most arrogantly to burn incense at the altar of his fame are drawn from the very class who, were he alive today, would hasten to repudiate him as a dangerous malcontent. False as they are to every one of the great principles to which our hero consecrated his life, they cannot hope to deceive the popular instinct, and their presence at the '98 commemoration will only bring into greater relief the depth to which they have sunk. Our Home Rule leaders will find that the glory of Wolfe Tone's memory will serve, not to cover, but to accentuate the darkness of their shame.¹⁸

As Connolly indignantly stressed, Tone's inheritance was appropriated even by the parliamentarians. That appropriation was quite paradoxical. In August 1898, John Dillon asked young people 'to study his life, his writings and his teachings'.¹⁹ In Sligo, William O'Brien, whose United Irish League, founded in January 1898, played an important part in the reunification of the Irish Parliamentary Party,

¹⁸ *The Words of James Connolly* (Cork and Dublin, 1986), pp. 46, 66-8. ¹⁹ On John Dillon's tactics read, Kevin Whelan, *The Tree of Liberty* (Cork, 1996), p. 173, and Senia Pasetta, '1798 in 1898, the Politics of Commemoration' in *Irish Review*, 22 (1998), pp. 51-2.

appealed to the men of '98 but stressed that the methods of carrying the struggle must be changed. This is the main theme of his pamphlet, *Who Fears to Speak of Ninety-Eight?*, written in 1898. First of all, he accuses the Castle party of having set 'the Catholics and Protestants at daggers', and Lord Castlereagh of having inflamed 'the terrors of the country gentlemen by fabricated rumours of a general massacre, after the French fashion, and then let them loose, in all the unbridled fury of the Ascendancy party armed with plenary powers to flog, torture, kill, violate, burn, as their terrors or their lust might prompt them'. The emphasis is put on the exploitation of sectarian tensions by the English government and on the atrocities committed by the Ascendancy. Then he expresses his fears that the parliamentary party might lose 'its hold on the Irish masses', implicitly laying the responsibility on the IRB:

The popular confidence in the effectiveness of constitutional agitation is being seriously shaken, and that not merely by the strength of the anti-Home Rule prejudice in England or the dubious attitude of some of the minor liberal wire-pullers, but by still more serious influences in Ireland which – for what reasons, or with what objects men will ask themselves hereafter with stupefaction – seem to be lending themselves, consciously or unconsciously, to the work of paralysing the Irish Party in Westminster and making any open organisation in the country impossible.

He continued:

The patriotic agitation which will prevail in Ireland during the year '98 will supply just the atmosphere in which the hot-blooded young Irishmen and even a good many cool-headed ones might well begin to reconsider their opinions as to the efficiency of Parliamentary methods in the present circumstances of Ireland.²⁰

So each political strand understood or wanted to understand Tone in its own way and used him to suit the needs of the moment. The commemoration displayed an artificial unity and distorted Tone's memory. The executive Council of the IRB asked 'all associations to ignore a request to attend a reception for Redmond'. The IRB wanted to exploit the commemoration to consolidate their organisation but did not succeed, though the Wolfe Tone demonstration was 'a monster IRB turnout'. John Redmond wanted to use the occasion to continue the struggle for Home Rule. Moreover, there were internal dissensions in both camps. The INB, led in Britain by Dr Mark Ryan, was a rival of the IRB, but the 'William Orr '98 Club, their principal stronghold, had recently been unable to muster sufficient

²⁰ William O'Brien, *Who Fears to Speak of Ninety-Eight?* (Dublin 1898), pp. 16, 31.

strength to expel IRB men from a meeting and had had to put up with their interruptions'.²¹ The rival constitutional factions, the Parnellites under John Redmond and the anti-Parnellites under John Dillon, wanted to play an important part in the Centenary Committee.

The hierarchy of the Catholic Church had always been opposed to the activities of United Irishmen and the Fenians. At a time when the Church was in the process of consolidating its power it felt itself threatened by a movement over which it would have little or no control. When the *Irish People* published passages from Myles Byrne's *Memoirs* and underlined the role of Catholic priests in the Society of the United Irishmen, the Church wanted to rehabilitate the role of the clergy while maintaining its opposition to secret societies. This new conception is embodied in Fr Patrick Kavanagh's book, *A Popular History of the Insurrection of 1798*, which was published in 1870 and reissued in 1884, 1898 and several times thereafter. This book 'formed the interpretation which lay behind the 1798 commemorations in County Wexford'.²² The presentation of the rebellion as a fight for 'faith and fatherland', with Fr John Murphy guiding the people, had (and still has) a great impact on the popular mind. The official attitude of the Church toward the rebellion changed. The archbishop of Dublin, W.J. Walsh, was the first, with T.M. Healy, to subscribe to the erection of the Wolfe Tone memorial. Enclosing a cheque for £20, he wrote to Liam Ó Maolruanaidh on 12 August 1898:

I cannot be with you on Monday but I feel it a privation. I thus lose the pleasure of witnessing the spectacle, now so rare in Ireland, of so many representative Irishmen coming together in cordial union for the accomplishment of one great purpose of national interest as to which they are all agreed.²³

Tone's great idea of Irish brotherhood played no part in the commemoration. His dream of uniting Protestants and Catholics was consigned to oblivion. Connolly was one of the few people who thought of a union between the different religious groups, but he understood it in the light of his socialist convictions.

One of the great differences between the centenary and the bicentenary of the rebellion lies in the fact that, at the end of the twentieth century, about a month after the Northern Ireland 'Good Friday Agreement', there was a will to shed light on a turning point in Irish history, to understand the reasons for the bifurcation of the unionist and nationalist traditions and the amnesia of the Presbyterians.²⁴ Richard Musgrave's *Memoirs of the Various Rebellions*, which played a prominent role

21 Ó Broin, *Revolutionary Underground*, pp. 86, 89, 90. 22 John Turpin, '1798, 1898 and the Political Implications of Sheppard's Monuments', in *History Ireland*, 6/2, (1998), p. 45.

23 Pádraic Óg Ó Conaire, 'Liam Ó Maolruanaidh', in *Capuchin Annual*, 1971, p. 101.

24 1798 Bicentenary Conference, Ulster Museum, Belfast, 19-20 May, Dublin Castle, 21-23 May 1998, p. 8.

in the moulding of the idea of a 'popish plot', were being republished. A.T.Q. Stewart stated that the northern rising 'was to a large extent a Presbyterian rebellion', in which 'some twenty Presbyterian ministers and probationers were involved, and two were executed'.²⁵ Ian McBride put the emphasis on the diversity of attitudes within the Presbyterian community before '98 and noted that Presbyterians have not always feared to speak of '98 and that a 'hidden' history of 1798 survived in the countryside, for instance in 'the popular poems and songs of James Orr and others, and the Betsy Gray legend popularised by W. G. Lyttle'.²⁶

The centenary of the French Revolution took place in France nine years earlier. It was celebrated at a time when the men who claimed to follow its ideology (Clemenceau, Sadi-Carnot) were in power, and the Republican tradition was challenged by the Boulangist crisis. The state commissions and committees aimed at laying the foundations for a historical republican science by the popularisation of documents and the creation of University chairs. Decorations, statues, monuments tended to glorify the republican past. The commemorative system, with its ritual ceremonies, was at its peak. The main event was the World Fair, marked by the inauguration of the Eiffel Tower, which had nothing to do with the Revolution. As in Ireland, there were rivalries between political elements as to the exclusivity of the celebration. The centenary was a success for the Third Republic. It illustrated the dynamism of a country whose decadence had been diagnosed since 1871. It illustrated its unity as well: the last public commemoration of the centenary took place on 2 September, on the eve of the general elections that were to be a success for the Republicans (Boulangier fled to England on 1 April 1889). The centenary celebrated the nineteenth century and the idea of technical progress more than the revolutionary past, great principles and great men (Carnot, Danton) rather than political events. It was first of all nationalistic.²⁷

The centenary celebration of 1798 was also nationalistic. It contributed to the resurgence of national feeling, to the reunification of the parliamentary party and to the emergence of Sinn Féin. It consolidated a mythical vision of the past linked to a vision of the future independence of the country. The fact that Tone was the central figure endowed the commemoration with a specific spirit and was perhaps an early warning of the future rising.

At Tone's graveside on 22 June 1913, Patrick Pearse recalled Tone's famous declaration: 'To break the connection with England, the never – failing source of all our political evils . . . To unite the whole people of Ireland.' He urged his audience to pledge themselves to fight as Tone had done and described Bodenstown as the holiest place in Ireland.

The recovery of Tone's inheritance by different political strands during the

²⁵ A.T.G. Stewart, '1798 in the North', in *History Ireland*, 6/2 (1998), p. 38. ²⁶ Ian McBride, 'Memory and Forgetting: Ulster Presbyterians after 1798' in *1798 Bicentenary Conference*, pp. 42-3. ²⁷ Ory, *The Centenary of the French Revolution*, pp. 523-61.

centenary commemoration of 1798 shows that 'to commemorate is a strange activity', one that 'fluctuates between presence and absence. Unlike the religious celebration which displays the eternity of a presence, the historical celebration knows that its object is no more present'.²⁸

²⁸ Patrick H. Pearse, *Political Writings and Speeches* (Dublin, 1922), pp. 58–9. ²⁹ Mona Ozouf, 'To Honour, to Know and to Celebrate', in *Le Débat*, 58 (1989), p. 19.