Wolfe Tone’s Death: Suicide or Assassination?

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Abstract

The final events of Wolfe Tone’s short and stormy life are fairly common knowledge. He was captured on board the French flagship Hoche when the vessel surrendered to a superior British naval force off Lough Swilly on October 10, 1798. Despite his protests that he was entitled to normal prisoner-of-war treatment, he was brought in irons a month later to Dublin. A court martial was hurriedly convened and he was found guilty of treason on Saturday November 10 and condemned to be hanged two days later.

According to the generally accepted version of subsequent events he cut his own throat early on the Monday morning. The assistant surgeon of the 5th Dragoon Guards dressed the wound “- but only with a view to prolong life until the fatal hour of one o’clock”. This surgeon was Benjamin Lentaigne, a Royalist emigre from France.

Despite the pleas of John Philpott Curran, a leading advocate of the day, the military authorities refused to allow any consultation with a civil surgeon. Was this just bloody mindedness or was there an even more sinister reason? Two possibilities come to mind. One was that the wound had been so incompetently treated that a consultant would have been forced to make adverse comments, the other that the throat wound was not due to a cutting injury but, to a bullet fired either deliberately or accidentally and a knife or razor was then used to try and camouflage the original trauma.

In 1812 Lentaigne published a pamphlet in Latin in which he made reference to an unusual neck wound stating that “- the bullet passed through his throat...” There is no direct evidence that the victim was Tone, why did the writer not make this clear? It may be he was reluctant to expose the medico-military inefficiency or callousness or to jeopardise his son’s career. Whatever the true facts, the verdict must remain the Scots one of “Not proven”.

Theobald Wolfe Tone (1763-98) was captured on the French flagship Hoche when the final French expedition was surrounded by a much larger British naval force awaiting it off Lough Swilly on 10 October 1798. The battle lasted 6 hours, with Tone commanding a gun battery. He was brought to Derry Jail where Major General Lord Cavan (1763-1836) ordered him into irons, hand and foot, the reason being, in effect, that he was Irish. He was allowed to complain to Cavan in writing. The Derry Journal of 13 December 1798 said he “complained violently and with Republican insolence”, Sight of the actual letter in the National Library (ms 8505) indicates otherwise, being couched in moderate terms and ends thus: “with great respect”. Cavan, 7th Earl, was of the Lambart family from Surrey and county Cavan.

‘Arrest of Tone’ (Derry Journal.)

In Derry jail Tone was identified by Sir George Hill of the anti-Irish Beresford Lord Waterford clan, a former friendly student in Trinity College summoned there for this purpose. Due to bad weather on the sea and land it was not until 8 November that the captive arrived in the grim Provost Prison at the back of Dublin Barracks, later called Royal Barracks and Collins Barracks (The Irish Sword, Vol. 11, Nr 42). It was half dug into the rising bank of earth of Arbour Hill making two Black Holes in one of which Wolfe Tone was held. The barracks itself is dark, gloomy and with an air of foreboding.

The Trial of the Century

The courtmartial which everyone said was inevitable was convened with extraordinary haste, it being the intention apparently to execute Tone without delay and “in a most public manner by hanging as a striking example” (Cornwallis JP 1189, NLI). Hundreds of Dublin’s beau monde thronged in front of the barracks gate and when it was at last opened there was a melee to get the best places in the venue, the Riding School. Here on Saturday 10 November Tone was speedily found guilty of treason by major General Loftus and his fellow officers; indeed he confessed to it – “to save their time and trouble” – and perhaps expecting, as a quid pro quo, a military firing squad for a soldier’s death. But because Friday for some reason was lost, the execution date was changed to 1 p.m. on Monday November 12, outside the ‘New Prison’, now Green Street Courthouse. Tone’s brigadier general’s uniform was admired, albeit a trifle dishabille from being in the Black Hole. But many of the younger Ascendancy types laughed and scoffed and this seemed to distress Tone.

Tone was not told this until late on the Sunday night as the damp cold turned his cell into an ice box. He then wrote to the French Directory, to his family and, of most interest, two letters to his adoring wife, informing them that Cornwallis, the Lord Lieutenant, had sent word that his execution request was denied.

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Attempted Suicide?

In the early hours of Monday November 12 Tone allegedly cut his throat with a razor (*Pakenham's Year of Liberty*, p. 396) or a penknife (Cronin and Roche 223). He missed the carotid artery but partly severed the windpipe. When found by a sentry at about 4 a.m. in a pool of blood the Assistant Surgeon of the 5th Dragoon Guards, distant about 200 metres, was sent for and according to 'The Proceedings of the Military Court' - and its sequel (JP 1189 NLI) - "It, (the wound) was dressed but only with a view to prolong life 'till the fatal hour of one o'clock". This was bizarre, and now looks as if it was pre-arranged. What surgeon would agree to that restriction, unless coerced?

In the Four Courts at about 10 a.m. the famous legal advocate John Philpot Curran (1750-1817), not knowing what had transpired, applied for Habeus Corpus for Tone before the sitting judge of the King's Bench, Lord Kilwarden. It was refused twice at the barracks as well as an order for the arrest of Major Sandys the Brigade Major and the Provost Marshal (Cronin, Roche 225; Pakenham 396). In addition Lieut. General Craig, GOC The Barracks and Dublin District, concealed Tone's condition.

Tone's Courtmartial Declared Illegal

Judge Kilwarden (1739-1803) then declared the courtmartial illegal, because Tone was not a British soldier or officer subject to military law and court, and in addition a sitting court of the King's Bench was thwarted having precedence over a military courtmartial. In the meantime Major General Lord Cornwallis (famous for surrendering America to George Washington) had postponed the sitting court of the King's Bench, Lord Kilwarden. It was refused twice at the barracks as well as an order for the arrest of Major Sandys the Brigade Major and the Provost Marshal (Cronin, Roche 225; Pakenham 396). In addition Lieut. General Craig, GOC The Barracks and Dublin District, concealed Tone's condition.

Tone's Military Surgeon

Whatever about the above possibility, the pedigree and life of Tone's military surgeon is quite interesting. Lieutenant Benjamin Lentaigne was born in 1773 in Caen, Normandy. He was an anti-Republican Royalist emigree from revolutionary France who escaped to England. Two of his brothers were guillotined and so he was unlikely to be attracted to such a disciple of the Revolution as Wolfe Tone. Lentaigne obtained a medical qualification in England, joined the British Army and was appointed to the 5th Dragoon Guards in Dublin Barracks in 1795 where he was Assistant Surgeon.

His father was Count Pierre Francois Lentaigne de Logiviere who had been also a Lieutenant of Dragoons (Gen Ofc ms 179). The Lentaignes were Catholics and in Ireland Benjamin found himself in a Protestant milieu. Yet his only son, John Lentaigne, FRCSI, was knighted (1880), lived in Tallaght House and obtained almost every prestigious appointment in Dublin from Government Commissioner of Loan Funds to Surgeon to the Household of the Lord Lieutenant. Benjamin resigned from the Dragoons in 1799 a year after Tone died, and married Marie Therese O’Neill of Athboy, county Meath. He had himself also been in ‘Arme de la Noblesse Francois’. Then, according to George Faulkner’s *The Dublin Journal*, he set up ‘a lucrative and fashionable practice in Merrion Square’.

Sir John (1803-86) had 11 children, who married into the Ascendancy, Royalists of course. Their families comprised the Earl of Meath, the Brabazons, Wallers, Magans of Emo, Plunketts, Esmondes, Stronges, Aylmers (Barts), Poucirs, and Lady French’s family, (Gen ofc ms 108,153, 179, NLI). One of his sons Joseph became Permanent Secretary to the Lord Chancellor of Ireland, while son Gerald was placed as assistant secretary to the Indian Government (Catholic’s Who’s Who and Year Books, 1875, 1910, 1913, and Medical Who’s Who 1914.).

Another son, Sir John Lentaigne, Benjamin’s grandson (PRCSI 1908-10), was born on 19th July 1855 and educated at Clongowes and TCD. He was surgeon to the Mater Hospital and wrote on a variety of subjects. He married Phillis Cobbe and they had 8 children. Sir John